

COLD FIRE: GENDER, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE FILM INDUSTRY IN COLD
WAR THAILAND

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COLD FIRE: GENDER, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE FILM INDUSTRY IN COLD
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Cold Fire is a study of how the international film industry in Thailand became a productive site for expressions of gendered cultural nationalism from the 1950s to the 1970s. National development projects expanded both state power and commercial markets for foreign and domestic film distribution. Those changes were facilitated by the domestic rise of military authoritarianism, intensive US political and economic intervention, rapid industrialization, and the communist threat in Asia. The United States and Thai governments used film as an instrument of psychological warfare to propagate conservative representations of Thai culture and society aimed at combating Communist sympathy. In doing so, they produced gendered representations of political behavior. Political consciousness was a masculine threat to the state. Thai women were positioned as inherently non-political, and therefore impervious to the threats of communism. The core values of Thai society promoted during this period, namely loyalty, passivity, and peacefulness, were implicitly feminine. Meanwhile, a new generation of filmmakers drew on the international discourse of modernization theory to promote technological advancement in Thai national cinema. The movement also articulated popular concerns, particularly towards the expanding presence of the United States and commercial development of the countryside. With the importation of commercial popular culture promoting alternative models for women and the

visibility of prostitution alongside military bases, elite expressions of Thai femininity were used to delineate national difference in opposition to the United States. As such, Thai women were viewed as deeply vulnerable to the threat of Americanization. Indeed, government censors and filmmakers alike increasingly focused on representations of gender and sexuality in commercial films. With the 1970s, a small group of filmmakers brought to prominence a conservative national cinema that drew on elite notions of a romanticized agrarianism and traditional femininity to assert an image of Thai authenticity. I therefore argue that during the Cold War communism and Americanization functioned as mutually constitutive threats within a gendered Thai political and social discourse. Cinematic regulation and representation of Thai women as wives, mothers, lovers, and prostitutes produced the gendered boundaries of the modern state. National cultural identity was predicated on women's unique and unequal status.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rebecca Townsend was born in Mountain View, California to Paul and Catherine Townsend. Her father was working towards a Ph.D at the time, and it had an effect. Rebecca has three siblings: Clarissa, David, and Ann. She received her B.A. in History from Arizona State University in 2008 and her M.A. in Southeast Asian Studies in 2010. She now lives with her partner Matt and son Paul in Wellington, New Zealand, and is learning to enjoy wind.

For Matt and Paul

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBFC	British Board of Film Classification
IIFF	International Information Film Festival
MIT	Mobile Information Team
MPAA	Motion Picture Association of America
MPEAA	Motion Picture Export Association of America
PCA	Production Code Administration
RTA	Royal Thai Army
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
TMPPA	Thai Motion Picture Producers Association
USIA	United States Information Agency
USIS	United States Information Service

INTRODUCTION

Scene One: In the 1957 Rat Pettanyi film *Rongraem narok* (lit. Hotel Hell), a glamorous female musician enters a tiny country hotel and bar.¹ The woman, named Flor, is dressed in a dramatic strapless evening gown and carries a guitar. She greets the barman with a “Good Evening!” in English. The barman, Noi, enthusiastically welcomes her in Thai. Again in English, the musician thanks him. Noi turns to a guest, a young woman named Riam who claims to be a sixty-five year old opium trader with twelve children. He tells her that the woman is a Filipina musician of the highest tier. She begins to sing, in Tagalog, the classic Filipino *kundiman* “Dahil Sa Iyo.”² Riam sits just in front of her, glumly eating a late dinner in her dressing gown. Finishing the song’s slow prelude, Flor switches to English for the rest of the song about the hope given by a true love. As she travels around the room, Noi and the hotel’s only other guest, a man named Chana, listen intently. Noi gives Chana a thumb up to show his enjoyment of the performance, which Chana returns. Keeping his thumb up, Chana looks cautiously over to Riam. Riam gives a thumb up, but then makes a face and sticks her tongue out at him. She is still angry at Chana from an earlier fight over the hotel’s only room that left Riam to make do with sleeping on the lobby sofa.

Scene Two: Riam, the heroine of Choed Songsri’s 1977 romantic film *Plae kao* (The Scar), awakes in the middle of the night in a four-poster bed in a Bangkok mansion. Dressed in a luxurious silk nightgown that reflects the film’s setting in the 1930s, she walks onto the large balcony overlooking the Chaophraya River. Haunted by the sound of a *khlui phiang au* (a vertical bamboo flute), Riam stares into the depths of the river and sees her former lover, Khwan, playing his flute. She turns, as if surprised, and has flashbacks to her childhood and adolescence amongst the rice paddies in a small village in central Thailand. There, she fell in love with Khwan despite their feuding families. While Riam has since enjoyed the westernized lifestyle of the Bangkok elite, from the latest foreign fashions to waltzing at lavish parties, the scene makes clear the pull that her former life still has on her.

These two scenes were produced nearly twenty years apart by two renowned Thai filmmakers. They present starkly different views of how gender informs Thailand’s culture, national identity, and international relationships. Although the two female leads are both named Riam, their similarities stop there. Rat Pettanyi’s Riam is feisty and complex, but not overtly

¹ While the film’s title literally means “Hotel Hell” or “Hellish Hotel,” it is usually translated into English as *Country Hotel*.

² Just seven years after the production of *Rongraem Narok*, “Dahil Sa Iyo” would gain renewed prominence when it became Imelda Marcos’ favorite song to sing on the campaign trail with her husband, Ferdinand Marcos. The song would come to be intimately associated with the Marcos brand. Christine Bacareza Balance, “Dahil Sa Iyo: The Performative Power of Imelda’s Song,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 2 (2010): 119–40.

feminine.³ That adjective is more aptly applied to Flor, the Filipina musician. Flor gracefully performs as the embodiment of femininity. Riam sulks in her pajamas. While Riam is undoubtedly the heroine, both women capture the viewer's attention. Choed Songsri's Riam has no such ownership over her identity as a woman. She is pulled between two different worlds: the westernized elite circles in Bangkok and the traditional Thai space of her girlhood village. The authenticity of the former is embodied in her intimate relationship with Khwan. However, Riam is thrown about by the currents of her family's vendetta and the dramatic changes wrought by Thailand's growing engagement with the outside world. Her intimate choices symbolize Thailand's national predicament.

The two scenes offer a glimpse into a transition in social history of gender in Thailand. In the 1950s, Thai national identity lacked clear assertions of distinctly Thai femininity.⁴ By the 1970s, a model for proper Thai femininity that all Thai women were expected to adhere to was at the core of national identity. Film was a critical medium through which representations of a standardized Thai femininity was propagated throughout the nation. Films provided powerful models showing how Thai women spoke, moved, dressed, felt, and behaved. That film had the power to do so was in large part because cinema became an important medium through which the state and disparate socio-political elite represented and critiqued national identity, belonging, and difference. It was also empowered by the rise of a national cinema movement that gained strength beginning in the 1960s.

The emergence of a dominant narrative that asserted gender, and specifically femininity, as defining Thai cultural difference was also the result of dynamics of Thailand's Cold War

³ Kaewta Ketbunkan, "Restored 'Santi-Vina' Offers Refreshing Window to 'Thainess' Past," *Khaosod English*, July 27, 2016, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/life/movies/2016/07/27/restored-santi-vina-reflects-thainess-rescreens-thursday/>.

⁴ This is not to say that previously gender had no role in Thai national identity. Indeed it did. I argue, however, that a coherent model for a "Thai woman" was not previously a figure in representations of Thai national identity.

experience. The formulation of a gendered threat to national cultural identity was shaped by the rise of the communist threat, American Cold War intervention, rapid industrialization, authoritarian military politics, and the rise of the monarchy under King Bhumibol (1946-2016) and Queen Sirikit. National identity was framed in opposition to the political and economic threat of communism and the cultural and social threat of the United States. These processes contributed to the standardization of conservative, elite formulations of femininity as a defining element in Thailand's sovereignty and unique national identity. Riam's westernized dress and lifestyle in *Plae kao* were far from stylistic features, but indicative of lost authenticity.

The difference in how gender operates as a component of national identity in the two films also demonstrates that Thailand's Cold War experience was not just about fighting communist ideologies and insurgents. Instead, the period was characterized by concerted efforts by government leaders, officials, and cultural elites to define and shape a national culture. The battle was fought not just with guns, but with cameras and screens as well. With the growth of infrastructure networks and international trade, the film industry expanded dramatically across the country. Film became the country's most important leisure business. It symbolized Thailand's modernity and the strength of its international connections.⁵ In this way, the Thai film industry became a productive site of negotiation over the construction of a national identity. Conservative assertions of Thailand's modern identity sought to situate it in traditional and uniquely Thai norms of behavior. Formulations also drew on discourses of development and internationalism. Filmmakers like Rat Pettanyi and Choed Songsri used innovative approaches and technologies to present a new type of cinema in which the nation could experience itself on screen.

⁵ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, "The Political Economy of Cultural Dominance/Dependence/Disengagement: The Transnationalized Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1983" (University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 1984), 209.

The rise of nationalistic filmmaking in Thailand is intimately connected to official and elite intervention in the cultural sphere. Efforts to build a national cinema went hand in hand with the political and social engineering of the modern period. The 1950s to the 1970s were defined by the interplay of both state development efforts and social development efforts. State development efforts expanded the central political capacity, for example through the expansion of the civil service. Social development, meanwhile, involved shaping and regulating the cultural, economic, and ecological landscape of Thailand as a nation.

The growth of the film industry thus went together with the expansion of state power during the Cold War. Yet the state by no means exercised exclusive control over film production. Indeed, in addition to Thai and US state-produced propaganda, films were made by such diverse individuals as a prince and leftists intellectuals. Even with films that critiqued politics and society, the aims of their producers and directors were disparate. However, in the chaotic traffic of Cold War era cinematic representation, a crossroads formed with respect to the role of women and femininity in national identity. Constructions of gender and national cultural belonging were with few exceptions deeply conservative. Thai and US government representatives and Thai filmmakers alike promoted static and elitist conceptions of female morality and feminine behavior. Those depictions became the ideal standard and critical marker of cultural and national difference. That assertions of difference were formulated in opposition to both the United States and communism highlights the ambivalent and contested ways that societies like Thailand dealt with the dynamics of Cold War developmental ideologies.

Indeed, national identity is made comprehensible by way of comparison and difference.⁶ Official efforts to propagate national identity were ubiquitous during the Cold War, and

⁶ Craig J. Reynolds, "Introduction: National Identity and Its Defenders," in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today* (Chaing Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), 3; Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 3.

institutionalized, for example, through policy, education, official media, and community organizations. Formulations were grounded in notions of Thailand's uniqueness- that Thailand alone in Southeast Asia survived the colonial period unscathed, that it had a unique national culture, and that it had to protect its sovereignty.⁷ The monarchy was intrinsic to that conception. This was particularly so during the reign of King Bhumibol, who was promoted and seen as the "father of the land" (*pho haeng phaendin*) or "father of the nation" (*pho haeng chat*).⁸

Cinema in Thailand also had long benefited from an association with the monarchy. The first films came to Siam in 1897. Royal symbols were used in theaters, and some of the earliest films of Siam or Siamese were produced by or featured royalty. At the same time, the domestic market gradually expanded and more people became involved in domestic production and exhibition. Yet even as the mass appeal of film grew, the medium's association with monarchy continued to grant it an elite status. It also became an important way for Thai citizens to partake in the ritual of the monarchy, as the state encouraged the practice of standing for the royal anthem prior to film screenings. Following on this legacy as a political medium, cinema from 1957 to 1977 assumed a privileged position in how the country's political and social development was depicted and consumed in the public sphere.

The relationship between Thailand's film industry and national identity formation was also situated within the global dynamics of the Cold War. With the onset of the Cold War, strategic relationships were structured along political and economic ideologies that made transnational alliances and development programs crucial aspects of both global and national

⁷ Reynolds, "Introduction: National Identity and Its Defenders," 11; Benedict R. O'G Anderson, "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies," in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2014), 19.

⁸ Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager, "Introduction," in *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2010), 3.

security.⁹ Amidst decolonization and post-World War II globalization, governments and multinational corporations focused on transnational mass communication technologies as a critical element in development and cultural modernization. Broadcast media introduced domestic and foreign radio, television, and film to larger audiences than ever before. They became powerful sources of information for people at every level of local and transnational society.¹⁰ In the Cold War era, film emerged as a vital medium for both the promotion and contestation of ideologies, and thereby an important site at which broader political and social dynamics were expressed, consumed, and debated.¹¹

Cinema also expanded as the Thai government pursued intense national development schemes, including massive infrastructure and communications projects. In part informed by modernization theory and related discourses on international development and progress, the projects were initiated under the authoritarian government of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957-1963) after his 1957 coup against the prime minister, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun) (1938-1944, 1948-1957).¹² The 1961 National Economic Development Plan, brought new roads and communication technologies that spread across the nation alongside an increased government administrative and police presence, especially in the northeastern region.¹³ In coordination with development projects, private and government-backed cinemas were built in rising numbers outside of Bangkok, while travelling film teams found it

⁹ See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005); Albert O Hirschman, *The Strategy of Economic Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹¹ Ronnie D Lipschutz, *Cold War Fantasies: Film, Fiction, and Foreign Policy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).

¹² Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

¹³ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2007).

easier to travel in rural areas.¹⁴ From the end of the 1950s there was a rapid increase in the production of domestic films and a general expansion of the Thai film industry, largely the result of improved access to the technology necessary for film production and continuing growth of a voracious domestic market. These changes accompanied increasing governmental use of film as a form of propaganda and communication with the masses, as in the case of the mobile development teams.

The expansion and development of technology and infrastructure increased the practical ability for the state to intervene in the lives of the populace. At the same time, capitalist markets reached greater portions of the population than ever before. The stakes were also high, as both the threat of communism and the impact of the American intervention created a crisis amongst members of the governing and elite classes. Indeed, since the 1930s, communism, and its associations with the Chinese, was “the epitome of un-Thainess.”¹⁵ American influence, meanwhile, came to be perceived as a significant threat in the 1960s and 1970s. While many of the standards of Thai national identity were birthed in the first half of the twentieth century, they became mobile in the second.

Meanwhile, the role of the monarchy in national life was revitalized under Sarit. The king and queen took on more active roles, particularly in rural areas where their developmental efforts had great effect. At the same time, perceived threats to national security at the village level demanded unprecedented attention to the geographically dispersed peoples living within Thailand’s borders. Under the guidance of the US, Thailand initiated extensive psychological

¹⁴ Annette Hamilton, “Cinema and Nation: Dilemmas of Representation in Thailand,” in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 141–61; May Adadol Ingwanij, “Transistor and Temporality: The Rural as Modern Thai Cinema’s Pastoral,” in *Representing the Rural: Space, Place, and Identity in Films about the Land* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 80–97.

¹⁵ Kasian Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2001), 190.

warfare operations, in which hundreds of films were produced to build villager loyalty to the “pillars” of the Thai state ideology—nation, religion, and king. While not officially one of the pillars, the security apparatus, particularly through the military and border patrol police, were likewise depicted as critical to the modern national-state.

As part of this, the village emerged as a major symbol of Thai authenticity.¹⁶ What the village meant for most Thai people varied dramatically across Thailand, and was influenced by factors such as distance from other towns and villages, access to resources, size, and location. A village in the predominantly Muslim south near the ocean would be substantially different from a northeastern Buddhist village on the Mekong River. While villagers in each may (or may not) have thought of themselves as Thai citizens, their beliefs, experiences, and even their daily language were likely to differ. However, in almost every film that I studied, the image of the rural, northeastern village dominated. Indeed, the northeastern Buddhist village became during the Cold War the quintessential *Thai* village. To a lesser extent, filmmakers used villages in central Thailand, although still predominantly those on the periphery of the northeast.

Cinema offers an important perspective on these patterns. It provides insight into the gendered social and political dynamics of Cold War Thailand and national identity formation because films so often claimed to represent and be accessible to ordinary people. Film indeed had a mass appeal. No major purchases needed to be made by individuals, as was the case with television or radio. Literacy was not required, in contrast to novels or newspapers. Audience comprehension admittedly benefitted from experience watching films. However, the act itself was also the education. Moreover, villagers did not need to be fully trained in the art of cinema to enjoy and reflect on the films.

¹⁶ Philip Hirsch, “What Is *the* Thai Village?,” in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*, ed. Craig Reynolds (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), 262.

At the same time, cinema was not an autonomous cultural phenomenon. It was also regulated and influenced by political, social, and economic forces. Film was not simply a mirror of society, but an important site of negotiation in the public sphere. Film was a creative medium, but one that also had to generate financial profits or receive critical acclaim to be considered a success. This fact vexed filmmakers, as they sought to break the influence of provincial audiences, who they saw as economically influential but prone to bad taste. Indeed, as filmmakers sought to control representation in film, its growing accessibility proved a double-edged sword.

The accessibility of representations of national identity in films contrast with the elevated position of prominent male public figures, including Prime Ministers Sarit and Thanom Kittikachorn (1963-1973), as well as King Bhumibol. The words and actions of those men inform the bulk of historical knowledge about the period. By contrast, women, with the occasional exception of Queen Sirikit, figure almost not at all. Thai identity is often viewed, and for good reasons, as deeply masculine and militaristic.

Propaganda and popular culture, however, make apparent that gender was not only critical to formulations of national identity, but that it became predicated on a certain type of Thai femininity. When the state made appeals for Thai people to be loyal, passive, and peaceful, they were mapping feminine ideals onto the whole of the Thai nation. Likewise, when commercial filmmakers portrayed national issues through subjects like prostitution, they linked gender issues to national security. There was also some room for alternatives and, at times, dissent. Female characters in Rat Pettanyi's films were complex and far from typically feminine. Ji Ungpakorn's *Kan to su khong kamakon ying hara rong ngan hara* (The Hara Factory Workers' Struggle, 1975), a documentary about female factory workers on strike, provided

evidence of female radicalism.

The mass appeal and prestige of film was tapped by the Sarit regime and the US as both sought to legitimacy through the deployment of royalist and developmental imagery. Indeed, representations of the monarchy on screen proved critical for making the figure of the king familiar to people living across the nation and promoting his image as a benevolent figure who would help bring the country forward. The production and exhibition of two films, *Niw petch* (Diamond Finger, 1958) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1960), showcased the monarchy. *Niw petch* was produced by the Ministry of Fine Arts and Rat Pettanyi for exhibition in the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit attended the screening. *A Sentimental Journey* was produced by the United States Information Service (USIS) to cover the royal family's 1960 tour of the United States. The royal pair's attendance at the 1958 screening and coverage in the 1960 film were indicative of their newly prominent roles in the promotion of Thai culture at home and abroad. Their prominence also had important implications for gendered representations of Thailand, as Queen Sirikit's own fashion choices and support for Thai national dress contributed to women's position as symbols of national difference and tradition.

Psychological operations and joint Thai-American propaganda, including films, likewise played an important role in promoting the monarchy and the production of a Thai anti-communist national identity. The Thai-American mobile film unit program and the production of propaganda films like the 1965 USIS film *Cold Fire* provide evidence that the primary goal of the government was to promote loyalty to the symbols of the Thai state. The focus on loyalty took precedence over other rhetorical priorities, including anti-communism, social development, and nation-building. Depictions of women as part of the fabric of traditional Thai society were part of the anti-communist propaganda deployed by both the Thai and US governments. Through

its production of films, the USIS was an active participant in the production of Thai femininity. *Cold Fire* demonstrates how depictions of national loyalty and anti-communism promoted traditional gender roles and the innate goodness of women. However, the programs also created new opportunities for women to participate in public gatherings where information about national events was disseminated and discussed.

Although the US played a critical role in Cold War representations of the Thai nation, its intervention did not go unquestioned. Anxieties over the impact of foreign social and cultural models in American films, especially amongst filmmakers and government officials in charge of regulating the industry, resulted in increasing concern with depictions of female sexuality and adultery. The production of representations of women as wives, mothers, and lovers by these same groups in turn played a defining role in the creation of boundaries of modern Thai culture and national belonging.

Cinema also engaged women as subjects of nationalism and propaganda in new ways. Unlike other media forms through which articulations of national identities were funneled, such as newspapers or radios, cinema was more accessible to a broader segment of the population. At the same time, women in Thailand were themselves reshaping the position of women in society and culture through participation in women's rights programs, labor movements, and student activism. The dynamics of authoritarianism and development had significant and historically situated impacts on women's positions in Thailand cultural, social, and political order, as symbols, subjects, and participants.

Anxieties over the status of women were connected to broader socio-economic changes. With rapid national development came widespread concern over its impact on so-called

traditional social structures, gender roles, and livelihoods.¹⁷ The concern with representations of gender became clear with state censorship. Between 1962 and 1972, the military government increased its use of censorship to regulate the film industry. Although censorship was used to regulate depictions of political issues, analysis of censorship of foreign films reveals a persistent effort to censor what were seen as inappropriate depictions of gender, family relations, and sexuality. Within regulations of depictions of sexuality and family relations, a focus on the issue of adultery in foreign films revealed not only the bureaucracy's own contested relationship with the legacies of polygyny, but also distinct concerns over female sexual morality and a growing women's rights movement. Censorship was not merely restrictive, but a productive tool in broader efforts to promote Thai values in the face of foreign models.

Censorship evidenced acute awareness by officials that film required careful regulation. Domestic filmmakers, on the other hand, increasingly advocated a different type of regulation for the industry. They argued that discontent with domestic cinema grew from perceptions of its low quality, particularly in comparison with Hollywood films. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Thai film industry had dealt with post-war shortages and the lack of domestic production facilities by producing cheap sixteen millimeter films.¹⁸ Filmmakers drew on indigenous performative traditions and exhibited films in raucous settings, such as festivals and celebrations. Commercially successful, the sixteen millimeter films did best in the provinces outside Bangkok. There, the films were condemned as *nang nam nao*, or putrid water films.

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup," in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University Press, 2014), 47–76; Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok, Thailand: Duang Kamoi, 1985); Juthamas Tangsantikul, "Kritsana Son Nong: The Politics and Practice of Manners in Modern Thailand (1950s-1970s)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2016): 189–209; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Sixteen millimeter films were cheaper, and therefore favored by home and amateur filmmakers, but also of lower quality (in size, color, and clarity).

Engaging with modernization discourse, filmmakers like Rat, as well as intellectuals and some government representatives, called for progress in the domestic industry.

Similar perspectives from the 1960s on led Thai filmmakers to work with the government to develop a national cinema. They sought to create a protected sphere of domestic film production and reduce foreign competition, particularly from the United States. Foreign films and their studios were portrayed as predatory, both in the commercial sense by creating monopolies and in the cultural sense through importing foreign values. A national cinema, by contrast, would promote the domestic industry as well as Thai national culture. Beginning in the early 1960s, three filmmakers, including Prince Phanuphan, Prince Anuson Mongkhonkan, and Rat Pettanyi, particularly sought official classification for a film “industry,” in line with government reforms to protect key national industries. In 1963, the government classified Thai film production and exhibition as an “industry” for the first time, but fell short of offering measures to curb foreign imports. The following year saw the creation of the Thai Motion Picture Producers Association (TMPPA) under Rat Pettanyi. These efforts promoted an approach to domestic cinema that made claims to cultural authenticity and national representation. But access to the methods of production and exhibition was largely restricted to a very limited number of studios led by elite men.

In defiance of nationalist attempts at reforming the industry, international markets, film festivals, and the dominance of American cinema in Thailand, meant that film was inherently and inescapably transnational. While other national cinemas were important in the Thai market, notably films from Chinese-speaking countries, American films held by far the largest market share. Even as filmmakers deplored the influence of Hollywood studios, they produced films using imported technologies and often with knowledge acquired from outside national borders.

Many of the most of the prominent domestic filmmakers, including Prince Chatrichaloem Yukhon and Choed Songsri, were educated abroad. It was also a point of pride for films to achieve success at international film festivals. But they chafed against the competition from American studios, which often had monopolistic contracts with local theaters. Thailand's first major film movement to produce a national cinema, the First New Wave, emerged in large part in reaction to unprecedented transnationalism. Although in *Rongraem Narok* English, Tagalog, and Thai mix fluidly in a scene featuring a Filipina singer living in a provincial town in Thailand, later films were more inward looking. Leaving behind characters like the unpredictable Riam, films like *Plae Kao* would tightly link idealized masculine and feminine gendered behaviors with nationalism. Cinema as a medium changed dramatically during the Cold War period, and so did its message.

Despite attempts by the state to control the message, the reality was that the land was not as peaceful as official images of the village would have it. Student demonstrations against the military government grew with the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. Villager discontent with the failure of the government to deliver on development promises led to an activist rural movement.¹⁹ The alliance with the US was rendered increasingly tenuous, becoming a source of criticism domestically as the US sought to decrease its presence in Southeast Asia. In October 1973, arrests of student activists led to a popular uprising in Bangkok that forced the Thanom regime into exile.

The populism of anti-American sentiment became clear with the inauguration of the tumultuous period of democratic government that lasted from 1973 until 1976. As successive governments struggled to find political unity, address serious economic issues, and curb

¹⁹ Tyrell Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law and Violence in Northern Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 106.

perceived threats from growing domestic communist forces, one of the few popular moves, made under the Kukrit Pramoj (1975-1976) government in May 1975, was to secure the withdrawal of US combat forces from Thailand.²⁰ Reflecting those anti-American and nationalist sentiments, filmmakers drawn from an increasingly powerful middle-class and cultural elite advocated cinematic modernization through a combination of technological advancement and social engagement. They called for far-reaching reforms to support a film industry that would compete with both low-quality domestic and exploitative foreign productions. Filmmakers like Choed and Chatrichaloem, but also Piak Poster, exemplified the shift towards professional filmmaking.

The ideal national film would be produced by a Thai citizen using domestic equipment, actors, and locations, financed by local investors with support from the government, and incorporate a “uniquely” Thai character, from music to costumes to landscape to themes. The new generation also more explicitly engaged in political and social issues in their attempts to depict contemporary Thailand. In the 1970s, an artistic movement called *sinlatham phuea chiwit* (Art for Life) introduced new ways of using film for political purposes. Unlike the First New Wave, it was inspired by socialist, rather than nationalist, ideals. Activist and leftist filmmakers critically discussed the lives of Thailand’s rural and urban poor in films such as *The Hara Factory Workers’ Struggle* and *Thongpan*.

However, conservative perspectives began to dominate Thailand’s national cinema. This was particularly so in the aftermath of the 1976 military coup against the democratic government.²¹ Thanin Kraivichien (1976-1977), an ultra-conservative law professor with links to

²⁰ In March 1975, there were 27,000 US military personnel at six bases and other facilities. By July 1976, there were less than 250 military personnel remaining. The Comptroller General of the United States, “Withdrawal of U.S. Forces From Thailand: Ways to Improve Future Withdrawal Operations,” Report to Congress, (1977).

²¹ Continued government instability and the victories of communist forces in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had led to a resurgence of the right-wing movement. This culminated in a massacre of student protesters at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976. A military coup followed that evening, and the democratic period ended.

both the military and the palace, was installed as prime minister. His government banned films like *Thongpan*. Choed exemplified that style in his use of nostalgic rural landscapes to assert images of traditional Thai culture in opposition to Western modernity. Indeed, the film began with a title screen appealing to the need to protect Thainess. From the film's landscape to the music, the film was deeply rooted in familiar sights and sounds. But conceptions of what constituted national character and who qualified as a legitimate filmmaker were defined along class and gender lines. It evidenced increasingly anti-Western depictions of proper Thai women. Practices that were associated with the lower class had no place in Thailand's modern cinema. *Plae Kao* was filmed in modern thirty-five millimeter stock with careful attention to cinematography, narrative, and editing.

In tandem, the government also finally made significant changes to support the film industry. At the end of 1976, the conservative Thanin government raised tariffs on imported finished film stock, which substantially increased the cost of importing foreign films. The increase was backed by the TMPPA and conservative politicians, who saw foreign films as a threat and sought to address the problem of a national cinema in Thailand. The years 1976 to 1977 were, from the promotion of Thainess through conservative values to nationalistic protectionism, the result of cumulative efforts over the previous two decades.

The conservative turn in late 1970s Thai cinema to a degree reflects the coercive power of the Thai state, particularly during periods of military rule. Indeed, the 1950s to 1970s made a profound impact on the relationship between state and society in Thailand, as well as on the status of the film industry in mediating that relationship. However, authoritarian governments operate through both coercive (despotic) power and infrastructural power, meaning the ability to

shape society by embedding the state within it.²² Sociologist Michael Mann's understanding of the autonomous power of the state is in this respect useful. He distinguishes despotic power, which he describes as "the range of actions which the elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalized negotiation with civil society groups," from infrastructural power.²³ Infrastructural power is, by contrast, "the capacity of the state actually to penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm."²⁴ Because under authoritarianism both despotic and infrastructural power is high, the period from 1957-1973 is significant for understanding how the two forms operate in Thailand. The dynamics of what Mann observed as developmental infrastructural power are visible in the post-1976 period. That is, while despotic power oscillates historically, infrastructural power proved more enduring through the modern period in industrializing societies.²⁵

Societal dynamics structured possible avenues through which the state could develop, and the vision that it pursued. However, as Mann noted, even in authoritarian states, "their power to change the fundamental rules and overturn the distribution of power within civil society is feeble- without the backing of a formidable social movement."²⁶ In Thailand, official collaboration with civil society actors produced important notions of national cultural and social belonging. Businessmen, artists, activists, and government officials were all involved in the social, cultural, economic, and political rise of the film industry. While the roots of nationalism in Thailand are traced back to the early twentieth century, national identity in the context of modern authoritarianism emerged in the late 1950s with the rise of leaders like Phibun and Sarit.

²² Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State : Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv Für Soziologie* 25, no. 2 (1984): 113.

²³ Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State," 113.

²⁴ Ibid, 113.

²⁵ Ibid, 116.

²⁶ Ibid, 114.

These men were part of Thailand's social, political, economic, and cultural elite that, at times with members of the up-and-coming middle class, shaped Thai politics for most of its modern history. However, those are incredibly diverse groups of people who usually had different agendas (when they have them at all) and are difficult to define. Who qualifies as an elite or middle-class is based on complicated contexts of time and circumstance. The elite and, again to some degree, the middle-class exercised inordinate control over the production (but not consumption) of film. Film was an expensive and difficult medium to produce and access. By and large, it was a select group of people who could forge careers in the commercial field. Moreover, the US and Thai governments had a monopoly on cinematic propaganda, as well as the regulation of the film industry.

With the long history and current revival of authoritarian politics in Thailand, it is necessary to consider the features of authoritarian states that make them alluring to citizens. As Thak Chaloemtiarana argued in his important study of Sarit,

His rule was harsh, repressive, despotic, and inflexible. Yet we must make clear assessments of the role he played in the development process of modern Thai politics. It is necessary that scholars answer the questions regarding Sarit's popularity, which was much greater than one would predict, given his distasteful tight-fisted rule; we must also note the system's limitations and built-in flaws, which eventually led to its own disintegration. By answering these questions, we will be able to understand the nature of modern Thai politics and glimpse certain aspects with the system that were inherited from the past and passed on to the present.²⁷

Not only do the roots of modern authoritarianism begin in the 1950s, but it is also from that period onwards that we see the intensification of state power in Thai society. By looking at infrastructural power and the collaboration of Thai civil society, the appeal of authoritarianism, whether in terms of popular opinion or as a mechanism for sustaining power, is, if not understandable, then at least more readily contextualized. The film industry was to a significant

²⁷ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 10.

degree harnessed for the development and negotiation of identities based on conservative ethnic, gender, and class norms. For that reason, it is a critical medium to examine the productive nature of infrastructural power in Thailand's modern history.

The films made during the Cold War in Thailand were embedded within the political and economic context in which they were produced. As filmmakers moved between Thailand and the United States for their education, between Bangkok film studios to international film festivals for exhibition, and from Bangkok to the Thai countryside for filming, they negotiated Thailand's international and domestic politics.²⁸ Thailand's international alliances, trade agreements, economic policies, and domestic development schemes all were part of the landscape that shaped film production. Thus, films became a major site of expression about Thailand's modern experience of capitalism, modernization, and the early stages of globalization.

Looking at the film industry through the lens of international political economy highlights the interplay of domestic and international economic and political forces in shaping the development of the local film industry. External stakeholders, namely the US government through the USIS and Hollywood studios, exerted a great deal of influence in the production and exhibition of films. For the USIS, which operated internationally to disseminate information promoting the United States its strategic and economic agenda, this was done through cultural diplomacy and psychological warfare. USIS used film, and the political power of American official and economic actors in Thailand, to attempt to shape cultural norms and loyalty to the state in order to fight communism. Hollywood studios, meanwhile, took advantage of unequal trade agreements and the consumer appeal of Hollywood films to dominate the commercial industry. Through their market power, they also wielded significant social and cultural influence,

²⁸ This echoes Benedict Anderson's discussion of the circulation of individuals between colony and metropole. Anderson and Mendiones, *In the Mirror*; Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

often to the chagrin of Thai civil servants and filmmakers. Hollywood studios and the US government in general worked well together in Thailand, although not in collaboration. While Hollywood ruled the commercial cinemas, the USIS provided films for official operations and US-sponsored events. Both were important elements in US soft power. However, sometimes the relationship was more direct. Whenever politicians or filmmakers called for increased tariff rates on foreign films, US government officials in Bangkok were always quick to discourage the Thai government from enacting any policy on the matter.

However, because the Thai state exerted control and influence in the film industry, any analysis of film during the Cold War must account for central state power. As political scientist Robert Gilpin noted, even in the contemporary period “the nation state plays the central role in guiding economic development and has to lead rather than follow the market.”²⁹ Indeed, the Thai state consistently sought to exercise control over the production and circulation of film. Moreover, as Thailand’s relationship with the United States and rapid economic and social change elicited a resurgence of nationalism, the nation as a symbol had a central role in film narratives.

It is also evident that women and femininity were critical to how Thai political and social actors dealt with the Cold War period and the contemporary expressions of national identity and belonging. However, with the rise of conservative nationalism in particular and official censorship of sexuality in films, depictions of women not only asserted so-called traditional models of modesty, but also denied women’s positions as political and economic actors in their own right. As Cynthia Enloe argued in her appeal for a feminist approach to international relations, we need methodological approaches that take women seriously and account for how

²⁹ Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 319.

ideas of femininity contribute to unequal experiences of international power relations. However, in analyses of international relations, the absence of women has been productive in perpetuating the invisibility of those unequal experiences.

It is clear that women in Thailand experienced the Cold War period unequally, whether due to Thailand's international relationships, national modernization, or the resurgence of nationalism. In each case, women were objectified as bearers of cultural and social tradition, and used to reinforce assertions of difference in national identities. However, it was a challenge to make women in the Thai film industry, as opposed to actresses, visible. To my knowledge, there were no female directors or producers. They weren't included in discussions of how to build a national cinema or reform state policy. They didn't accompany the USIS with its mobile film team. Drawing out the role of women in Thailand's political change remains a challenge because their erasure was pervasive. Nonetheless, women were active in the political and social change that substantially transformed Thailand from the 1950s to the 1970s. Thus, making women visible requires reading between the lines of post-exhibition surveys, censorship documents, and leftist documentaries. By looking at censorship of adultery in foreign films, for example, the significance of women's rights movements and attempts to reform family law become clearer.

While depictions of women as symbols of cultural authenticity produced an unequal experience of modernity and development, those representations were useful for the consolidation of political and social legitimacy by the state and elite actors. Constructions of national authenticity more often than not served the needs of only a few. Indeed, from censorship and to protectionism to propaganda, the central Thai elite, despite their different backgrounds and agendas, wielded the film industry to maintain the hierarchical status quo.³⁰ The intersection of varied agendas on certain points demonstrates the centrality of gender and class in the

³⁰ Anderson, "Thai Studies," 36.

operation of authoritarianism and national culture in Thailand. Indeed, Thailand's uniqueness and the need to protect cultural Thainess was and is still used to justify disciplinary and repressive measures.

The films featured in this study provide important insights into these processes. They come from a range of sources and genres, from commercial melodramas to short documentaries. As I will discuss, Thai films are not easily categorized into genres in the Western sense. Most films mix aspects of genres, moving, for example, between melodrama and comedy. However, the style of film that I give the least attention is the sixteen millimeter productions so often derided as *nam nao*. I was more concerned in films produced with an agenda, be it artistic, political, or social. In other words, my choice of films reflected my interest in attempts to use film for more than entertainment. Therefore, many of the films I used came from the First New Wave and Art for Life movements. Rat Pettanyi likewise figured prominently because he was such an influential figure in the industry at the time and is today considered iconic.

Finally, my choices were also determined by access. Many films did not survive the decades between their production and the present. Fortunately, the excellent work of the Film Museum and Archives in Thailand has saved many films from ruin. The latest example of this is their restoration of *Santi-Vina*. Regrettably, I was unable to view this film in time, but instead relied on newspaper accounts. Many of the films preserved by the Museum and Archives are now included in the annual *Moradok phapphayon khong chat* (National Film Heritage) registry, compiled by the Museum and Archives since 2011.

Rongraem narok and *Phlae kao* were among the first films to make the list. The two films present starkly different views of society, gender, and cinema in Thailand, but are now nonetheless both part of a national film canon. The films sit alongside short documentary films

of royal activities (footage of King Chulalongkorn in Switzerland), clips of historical events (the 1942 flood in Bangkok), radical leftist films (*Thongpan*), glossy heritage films (*Hom rong*), and contemporary avant-garde productions using digital technologies (*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*). The creation of the list reveals that the search for a national cinema remains significant, and that previously controversial films are not being incorporated in large part for their historical and artistic merit. However, the inclusion of historically controversial films alongside royal documentaries and conservative ‘heritage’ films provides an important reminder that Thailand national identity remains both an ongoing and contested project.

CHAPTER 1

THE DIAMOND FINGER: MONARCHY AND EXHIBITION

On March 24, 1950, King Bhumibol Adulyadej returned to Thailand for the first time since 1946. His fiancée, MR Sirikit Kitiyakara, accompanied him. Arriving on the HTMS *Sri Ayutthaya* in military uniform, King Bhumibol's return marked the beginning of the modern revival of the Thai monarchy. Over the next 73 days, Thailand held the royal cremation of Bhumibol's brother, King Ananda Mahidol (1935-1946), the marriage ceremony for Bhumibol and Sirikit, and the three-day coronation ceremony in which Bhumibol officially ascended the throne.³¹

The ceremony was filmed by the newly created Private Film Unit of the King.³² The unit would become a constant presence in the public activities of the king, whose public image would only grow in the coming decades. The film of the ceremony was screened at the Sala Chaloe Krung, one of Bangkok's most luxurious cinemas. It was built two decades earlier, in 1920, by Bhumibol's uncle and amateur filmmaker King Prajadhipok (1925-1935). However, King Prajadhipok had little opportunity to enjoy the theater himself, since construction was finished only after the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy. Prajadhipok abdicated in 1935, after which time the monarchy had a diminished presence in Thailand. So it was perhaps appropriate that the film of the returning king should play at the Charoen Krung. Architectural historian Lawrence Chua reflected on this event, writing,

Ordinary citizens and school groups flocked to the theater to see the film of King Rama IX... being crowned. This was the first opportunity for many to see a royal spectacle of this scale. The theater continued to be a venue for ordinary citizens to see royal

³¹ Nicholas Grossman, *Chronicle of Thailand: Headline News since 1946* (Bangkok: Bangkok Post, 2009), 48.

³² The unit is still in operation, and is one of Thailand's oldest filmmaking organizations still in existence. Thai Film Museum (Phiphitthaphan phapphayon thai), *A Century of Thai Cinema Exhibition's Handbook (Khumu Nithatsakan Nung Satawat Phapphayon Thai) (In Thai)* (Nakhon Phanom: Film Museum (Ho phapphayon), 2013), 107.

ceremonies until they began to be broadcast on television. It seemed as if the monarchy had resolutely conquered the raucous space of the cinema once and for all. At the turn of the century, the cinema was a crudely built vernacular space where newly emerging classes in Thai society could confront the contradictory looks, feelings, and odors of a nascent nation-state. By the middle of the century, it had become an example of polite architecture and a tool of the monarchy for projecting their own polished image of a “civilized” and “progressive” nation-state.³³

The filming of King Bhumibol’s 1950 return drew on a historical, if sometimes fraught, connection between the Thai monarchy and cinema. It also foreshadowed the way that film would become a critical tool in the promotion of the monarchy as a pillar in Cold War Thai society.

The use of film to celebrate and promote royal activities had precedent from the earliest period of cinema in Thailand. From the very beginnings, domestic film production was a leisure activity of the elite class. Consumption of films, by contrast, was a mass entertainment activity that, while centered in Bangkok, crossed class boundaries. With the development of indigenous commercial cinema in the 1920s, the government began to treat film as a medium of political communication. It was during that same period that coordinated official attempts to promote the government and monarchy emerged, including the creation of a government film unit. After the 1932 coup, the structures put in place to regulate the film industry and promote the government were deployed to foster anti-royal sentiment and loyalty to the new government. These patterns increased with the military, fascist order under Phibun. However, while various regimes and elites may have exercised significant control over the film industry, they did not do so consistently or for the same reasons. Indeed, they often had starkly different motives. Changes in the political use of cinema throughout the 1950s highlight that very point. With Phibun’s tenuous domestic position, the rise of Cold War politics in Asia, and more dramatically after Sarit’s 1957

³³ Lawrence Chua, “Absolutism and Air-Conditioning in Early Twentieth-Century Bangkok Cinemas,” *The Senses and Society* 6, no. 2 (July 1, 2011): 220.

coup, the monarchy became an important symbol of Thai cultural unity and anti-communism. Cinema was harnessed again to promote the monarchy as a pillar of Thai nationalism.

This chapter is divided into three parts that examine the shifting connection between cinema and monarchy. In the first part, I argue that efforts by the state under the absolute monarchy to regulate cinema were a response to the growth of the domestic commercial market. Despite cinema's popular appeal, its status as a royal hobby granted it important prestige that survived the absolute monarchy. In the second part, I argue that the use of film as propaganda accelerated from 1932 to 1957. In the early years, it was intended to bolster the new government and combat royalist sentiments. However, with Phibun's rise to power, cinema was used to promote his leadership and the importance of the military. In the third part, I discuss how, through the 1950s, the US alliance and Sarit's military regime together contributed to the revival of the monarchy under King Bhumibol.

The three sections highlight the historical use of film as propaganda and the development of psychological warfare during the Cold War. They also emphasize important changes in how domestic regimes viewed the relationship between the government and the people. How governments harnessed film, whether to promote the military or the monarchy, spoke to the strategic significance of Thai citizens in the security of the nation-state. Throughout these decades, government propaganda and psychological operations contributed significantly to conceptions of a national identity no longer consumed and embodied solely by the Bangkok elite, but by the citizens throughout nation.

Internationally, the rise of imperialism was an historical phenomenon that was critically shaped and enabled by technological innovations, which was in turn shaped by the demands of

imperialism.³⁴ For example, the creation of a network of telegraph wires in India and submarine cables to Britain enabled unprecedented rapidity of information between colony and metropole.³⁵ In Thailand, the technological advancement of communication and transport networks played an important role in the integration of Isan under King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) and throughout the first half of the twentieth century.³⁶ Film acted in a similar way in the expansion of central Thai cultural and state power. Films allowed representatives of the government, whether the prime minister or the king, to be seen and represented in remote villages even when the men themselves were far away. Films made real the people and activities of the central Thai government and monarchy. They allowed villagers to imagine themselves as part of the developing and progressing nation. With the 1950s, moreover, films and cinematic events, such as the 1958 Brussels World Fair, allowed the same figures and symbols to be promoted abroad.

Film thus became part of the national ritual of monarchy through the use of royal symbolism in theaters, the attendance of royals at screenings, and the documentation of royal activities in films. Repetition, either through the act of standing during the King's Anthem before each film screening or the numerous documentaries detailing royal activities, was made possible through technology. It became a critical feature of how films projected the image of the monarchy. Eventually, repetition turned into its own ritual, while also contributing to the broader ritualization of the monarchy. Repetition and ritual are features in the development of what political scientist Michael Suk-Young Chwe called "common knowledge." Describing the concept, Chwe wrote that "knowledge of the message is not enough; what is also required is knowledge of others' knowledge, knowledge of others' knowledge of others' knowledge, and so

³⁴ Daniel R Headrick, *The Tools of Empire : Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 11.

³⁵ Ibid, 157.

³⁶ Charles F. Keyes, *Finding Their Voice : Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2014), 54-55.

on- that is, ‘common knowledge.’”³⁷ Public ceremonies, for example, convey direct meaning to each member of the audience, but more importantly let the members of the audience know that the other members also know. In other words, rituals do not simply convey meaning, but collectively produce social knowledge.

From the beginning, film was used by Thai governments and the monarchy to shape social knowledge about the monarchy as an institution and Thai kings as symbols of the nation. Moreover, with the revival of the monarchy under King Bhumibol, film also played a role in promoting his image internationally and cemented the link between the monarchy and the nation in the world’s eyes. Looking back on the history of cinema in Thailand, it is clear that the medium’s political characteristics were fundamentally shaped and intertwined with the history of the monarchy.

From the first film screenings in Bangkok in 1897 until after World War II, the production and distribution of film was almost exclusively in the hands of members of the Thai aristocracy and a few foreign, mostly Chinese, companies. The early period from 1887 to 1932 is associated in particular with the activities of the monarchy. Cinema’s royal origins proved crucial to shaping Thailand’s early experience of cinema, as well as later debates about cinematic quality. From the beginning, it created a privileged space for film in the national consciousness. King Chulalongkorn is credited as the first Thai to see a film.³⁸ In 1896, less than a year after the Lumiere invention of the Cinematographe, King Chulalongkorn saw Thomas Edison’s Kinetoscope in Singapore. In his diary, the king wrote of

A machine whose name we cannot remember. Inside it is attached a role of photographic film, whose rotation occurs at a pace which makes the images seem to move by

³⁷ Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³⁸ Thai Film Museum (Phiphitthaphan phapphayon thai), *Exhibition’s Handbook*, 18.

themselves. One sees a cockfight; the cocks hop about at the beginning of the fight, their feathers flying, then the out-stretched hands of the gamblers, as if all these images had a life of their own.³⁹

Chulalongkorn's recollection highlights the documentary nature of early cinema. Most of the earliest films were recordings of daily life.⁴⁰

The first film that featured content about Siam was an 1897 recording of King Chulalongkorn in a royal procession in Berne, Switzerland.⁴¹ In 1897, at a playhouse owned by Prince Alangkan, the travelling showman S.G. Marchovsky premiered the first film screening in Siam, which included one film about an undersea diver and another about a boxing match.⁴² Private screenings were put on for members of the aristocracy and royal family, including Prince Damrong, the Ministry of the Interior, and Prince Thewawong, the Foreign Minister. Another showing was arranged for Queen Saowapha, the mother of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925) and Prajadhipok.⁴³

That same year, Prince Thongthaem Sapphasat Suphakit (Sapphasat), a younger brother of King Chulalongkorn, purchased "three sets of *nang farang* (Western Films)" whilst on a royal tour of Europe. Royal interest in photography translated well into familiarity with the emergence of film technology in Europe. Prince Sapphasat exhibited his films in Bangkok from at least 1900, becoming Siam's first filmmaker.⁴⁴ Most of Sapphasat's films were of King Chulalongkorn and

³⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁴⁰ Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 740.

⁴¹ *Berne: Arrivee Du Roi de Siam (Phrachao Krung Sayam Sadet Thung Krung Bern)*, 1987. Thai Film Museum (Phiphitthaphan phapphayon thai), *Exhibition's Handbook*, 19.

⁴² Scot Barme, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 44.

⁴³ Scot Barme, "Early Thai Cinema and Filmmaking: 1897-1922," *Film History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 308–309.

⁴⁴ Thai Film Museum (Phiphitthaphan phapphayon thai), *Exhibition's Handbook*, 23.

royal ceremonies.⁴⁵ In general, however, his films were shown among select groups of the royal elite in private viewings.⁴⁶ He is now regarded as the “father of Thai cinema.”⁴⁷

Royal association with cinema was also indicative of the modernization of the image of the monarchy more broadly. Maurizio Peleggi, a cultural historian of Thailand, argued that at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the monarchy refashioned itself “in the project of asserting their ‘civilized’ status and, consequentially, their claim to ‘national’ leadership.”⁴⁸ This impacted royal practices of consumption, representation, building, and public spectacles. Technology, such as photography, was used to promote the monarchy. Royal contact with Siamese subjects was facilitated through the distribution of royal imagery in photographs, stamps, and postcards. That Chulalongkorn was filmed in Switzerland in a grand European-style royal procession was evidence of those changes. The relationship between monarchy and technology was fundamentally political.

Royal modernization and consumption also had productive effects. When film was taken up as a royal hobby, it influenced popular conceptions of the medium. Indeed, the monarchy was crucial to the early development of a “national” cinema. Thailand scholar Scot Barmé argued that:

Royal patronage of the cinema during this time was of particular significance in that it conferred film with a degree of prestige denied to other types of popular commercial entertainment such as *likay* [Thai folk theatre] or *ngiw* [a Chinese form of folk theatre]. Elite distaste for these cultural forms was based on a feeling that they were too

⁴⁵ Barmé, “Early Thai Cinema and Filmmaking,” 313.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 308-309.

⁴⁷ Dome Sukwong, *Wan Sapphasat (The Day of Prince Sapphasat)* (Phutthamonthon: Thai Film Museum, 2011). Dome Sukwong called Sapphasat the “Father” of Thai cinema because, based on the available records, he was the first Siamese person to produce and commercially exhibit films in Siam (but not the first to exhibit). Although grounded in good evidence, the claim also invalidated earlier histories that credited foreign filmmakers as the first to produce and show films in Siam. However, the designation of “father,” combined with Rat Pettanyi’s title as the “Father of Modern Thai Cinema,” first highlights the absolute dominance of the industry by men. Second, it shows the emphasis on film production in histories of cinema in Thailand.

⁴⁸ Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things : The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 3.

immediate, too recognizable and most importantly, too identifiable with the lower orders, while the cinema, as an imported foreign form from the ‘civilised’ world, was, in spite of its popular appeal, valued as embodying the mystique of modernity.⁴⁹

Royal symbolism was extended from production to content to the infrastructures of cinema itself. Cinemas from very early on used royal patronage and imagery to increase the prestige of the cinema.⁵⁰ For example, the Japanese Cinematograph, the first permanent theater in Siam, underwent renovation and reopened in 1910. The owners had “‘by special appointment to His Majesty the King’, received permission to call itself ‘The Royal Japanese Cinematograph.’ In September 1910, an official ceremony, attended by Prince Damrong and his two daughters together with a number of other princes, was performed in which a royal coat of arms was erected at the front of the theatre.”⁵¹

The popularity of film also resulted in the rapid construction of cinemas more generally. Especially in Bangkok, cinemas quickly became important social institutions. A night out to see a film became a popular form of entertainment and social activity. Cinemas were built in local provincial capitals, as well as outdoor screenings in rural areas around Thailand.⁵² Early cinemas sold tickets cheaply and were open to audiences from a wide variety of social and economic backgrounds.⁵³ The mixed nature of the crowds did not always please patrons. As described in the beginning, Chua found that “Bangkok cinemas had been raucous public spaces where older elites encountered newly emergent social classes with unprecedented intimacy. Letters written by audience members to the magazine *Phapayon Sayam* in the 1920s complained of the bad smell and uncouth behavior of poor and immigrant Chinese cinema goers who were referred to

⁴⁹ Barne, “Early Thai Cinema and Filmmaking”: 311-312.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 312.

⁵¹ Ibid, 312.

⁵² Dome Sukwong and Sawasdi Suwannapak, *A Century of Thai Cinema* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 25.

⁵³ Barne, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 89.

alternately as “nuisances” and “the stinking hordes.””⁵⁴ From the very earliest period, then, the prestigious character of film contrasted with the less savory nature of mass audiences.

While many cinema operations were foreign-owned, Hollywood studios offered the bulk of films. No systematic statistical data is available before 1934. However, newspaper articles, film booklets, and advertisements of film programs demonstrate Hollywood’s market advantage and popular appeal. By the late 1930s, 95% of films screened in Thailand were from the United States, followed in ranking by Hong Kong, France, Britain and Japan.⁵⁵ Hollywood’s early advantage was in part due to the presence of American studio “advisors” who were able to negotiate lucrative contracts with local companies.⁵⁶

Through the 1920s the royal government became more directly involved in the production of film for commercial and propaganda purposes. Vajiravudh had a deep, personal interest in film. He organized an amateur film club at Jitlada Palace “whose objectives were to gather together high-ranking state managers who liked pictures in order to view and exchange their collections.”⁵⁷ But he also saw the potential for cinema in political terms. In 1922, for example, Vajiravudh secretly began supporting the Sayam Niramai Company. The king apparently did this to prevent Siao Songuan Sibunruang, a middle-class Sino-Thai, from gaining a monopoly of the film industry.⁵⁸ Vajiravudh was deeply concerned about Chinese influence in the cinema industry, and sought to increase royal influence. However, despite royal patronage,

⁵⁴ Chua, “Absolutism and Air-Conditioning”: 217.

⁵⁵ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1992,” *East-West Film Journal* 6, no. 2 (1992): 67.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁷ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 107.

⁵⁸ In fact, Vajiravudh had a contentious relationship with the Sibunruang family. The founder of the family, Siao Hut Seng Sibunruang, was Chinese and a British subject. He founded two newspapers, including *Chino Sayam Warasap*. In part through that newspaper, in 1911 he engaged in an exchange with Vajiravudh over politics, the monarchy, and the Chinese community. Phenphisuth Inthonphirom, *Siao Hut Seng Sibunruang: The Perspective and Role of Sino-Thai in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Sun Prawatsat khwamsamphan Thai kab prathet nai Asia, 2004), 63-72.

the Sayam Niramai Company lasted only two years before going bankrupt.⁵⁹

It is also likely that the broader context of political opposition and criticisms of the monarchy incentivized considerations of greater regulation of the public sphere. After 1917, for example, with rising numbers of literate intellectuals in Bangkok, political journalism developed to offer nationalist – and highly critical – alternatives to the royal narrative.⁶⁰ King Vajiravudh in particular was the target of criticism, which contributed to the declining popularity of the monarchy more broadly.⁶¹

The technology and capital required to produce films, by contrast, prevented a similar expression in cinema. Instead, the government was in a better position to control the medium for its own purposes. This long duration of elite control over the means of film production during the early decades of cinema in Siam cemented perceptions of the medium as both an elite form of art and a political tool. In 1922 the Topical Film Service was established within the Royal State Railways Department to make films advertising royal activities, tourism, government initiatives, public health, as well as some commercial films.⁶² The service produced some 509,600 feet of film, including 74 separate titles.⁶³ Two members of the royal family directed the film service, Prince Kamphaengphet and Prince Purachat.⁶⁴ Barmé argued that:

These documentary films, and later similar works, were screened in Bangkok cinemas as well as those in regional cent[er]s, and represent the beginning of a new era whereby the Thai state sought to promote its interests on a mass scale by visual means. For the first time audiences were brought into closer contact with their fellow compatriots through film which began to help shape and define the growth of a national imaginary, a consciousness of an emergent Thai nation.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 47.

⁶⁰ Matthew Copeland, “Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam” (Australia National University, 1993), 52.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 82.

⁶² Dome Sukwong, *The History of Thai Film (Prawat Phapphayon Thai) (In Thai)* (Bangkok: Ongkan kha khong khurusapha, 1990), 9.

⁶³ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 109.

⁶⁴ Barmé, “Early Thai Cinema and Filmmaking,” 314.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 314.

Films promoting government and royal activities, therefore coexisted alongside critical newspapers.

Commercial domestic filmmaking, distinct from royal or government cinema, grew slowly during the late 1920s. In June 1927 the Wasuwat Brothers produced the first “Thai” feature film, titled *Chok Song Chan* (Double Luck).⁶⁶ Mani, Phao, and Kasian Wasuwat were the children of Phraya Suthorn Phimon (Phle Wasuwat) and Khunying Thim. Mani was educated at the Royal Pages’ College and worked as an official in the Ministry of Finance, before becoming involved in business.⁶⁷ Phao and Kasian worked for the Film Service, and joined with Mani to establish the Sikrungs Film Company.⁶⁸ The first domestic sound film, *Long Thang* (Going Astray, 1932), was also produced by the Wasuwat brothers.⁶⁹ The influence of elite families shaped the expansion of the commercial industry.

With the reign of Prajadhipok, royal concern over the public image of the government grew. As Thai scholar Matthew Copeland observed,

During the course of the reign, the king and his ministers not only paid close attention to press opinion- summarizing viewpoints, cataloguing clippings, and all the while exchanging commentary among themselves as to which essays warranted governmental action and which governmental sanction- but court speculation as to the desires and likely responses of ‘the public’ was almost invariably phrased in terms of “writings that had appeared or could be expected to appear in the Bangkok press.”⁷⁰

That the government acknowledged the fact of a “public opinion” went hand-in-hand with the need to court that opinion. It appears, then, that the 1920s offered an opening of the public sphere, if not in the nation as a whole then at least in Bangkok.

⁶⁶ There is evidence of earlier narrative films being produced in Siam in the 1910s, but only very little information remains. Ibid, 314.

⁶⁷ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 67 f.78.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 314-315.

⁶⁹ Khun Wichit Matara, *Long Thang (Going Astray)* (Phaphayon Siang Srikrung, 1932).

⁷⁰ Copeland, “Contested Nationalism,” 130.

Prajadhipok himself was an amateur filmmaker. In 1929, he filmed *Waen Wiset* (The Magic Ring), a short black and white film produced on 16 mm film stock, while on a trip in Ko Pha-Ngan.⁷¹ All of the actors in the film were members of the royal family.⁷² The film is about an abusive father with five step-children. The family travels to an island off the coast of Thailand in order to gather fruit. There, the children meet a water spirit (*phrai nam*), who gives them the magic ring that will grant their wishes. When their father sees the power of the ring, he plots to kill the child wearing it. But when he attempts to kill his son, the son turns the father into a dog. The kids take their fathers marijuana pipe and puff smoke into the dog's mouth. When the kids decide to turn their dad back into a human, he is extremely high. He hugs his children, and promises to raise them better going forward. The family pack up to leave, but as they board their boat the rings slips from the child's finger and falls into the water. They conclude that the spirit must have wanted the ring back, and leave the island a happier family.

The film is one of the oldest intact domestic films in Thailand today. It is notable as well for its creative use of intertitles, complete with child-like drawings to complement the dialogue. However, there is no evidence that the film was ever commercially shown. Barmé wrote that “as far as can be determined, none of the king's works were ever exhibited in the Bangkok cinemas, perhaps out of fear that they would be publicly criticized by discerning viewers for their lack of sophistication in comparison with the productions of other, more skillful filmmakers.”⁷³ Ironically, the film likely would not have passed the censorship rules under the 1930 film act. A young boy turning his father into a dog and smoking marijuana certainly would have violated key points in the censorship guidelines.

Beyond his private filmmaking, Prajadhipok also sought to harness cinema to promote

⁷¹ Somdet chao fa prachathipoksakdidet, *Waen Wiset (The Magic Ring)*, 1929.

⁷² Wise Kwai, “A Cannes Contender, Oscar Hopefuls and Royal Home Movies,” *The Nation*, October 25, 2013.

⁷³ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 55.

the monarchy. In the 1920s, the King's Anthem began to be played after the end of the film, during which audiences were expected to stand. However, many did not conform to the new practice. Reports recall audiences rushing from the theaters before the anthem was finished.⁷⁴ Chua argued that theatres "fomented political rebellion. Audiences routinely refused to stand for the playing of the king's anthem, leading the monarchy to implement stricter punishment to those who displayed such open ambivalence towards the royal institution."⁷⁵ The description highlights the double-edged sword of cinema as an arena for the performance of national identity. When national rituals are observed correctly, they create and reinforce collective understandings that in turn shape behavior. However, when deviations occur, they also become public spectacles. As Chwe observed, common knowledge is created through public rituals, which act as "social practices". The phenomenon of shared spectatorship – knowing that others are observing a social phenomenon – serves to generate spontaneous normative consensus amongst the spectators.⁷⁶ Thus the spectacle of audience members watching one another showing disrespect for the royal anthem risked translating individual anti-royalist sentiment into a wider social practice.

In response to the lowly and transgressive nature of theater crowds, in the 1920s and 1930s cinemas underwent a "civilizing process" intended to assert the image of the absolute monarchy as the head of a progressive and civilized nation.⁷⁷ In 1921, the government passed legislation to prevent fires at cinemas in response to the unsafe conditions and the flammability of film stock.⁷⁸ But perhaps the most concerted effort under the monarchy to civilize Bangkok

⁷⁴ Ibid, 89.

⁷⁵ Chua, "Absolutism and Air-Conditioning," 218.

⁷⁶ Chwe, *Rational Ritual*, 3.

⁷⁷ Lawrence Chua, "Building Siam: Leisure, Race, and Nationalism in Modern Thai Architecture, 1910-1973" (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 2012), 206.

⁷⁸ Thai Film Museum (Phiphittaphan Phapphayon Thai), *Exhibition's Handbook*, 45.

cinema was the construction of the Sala Chaloem Krung theater and establishment of the United Cinema Company under King Prajadhipok.⁷⁹ Chua observed that “in the early 1930s the absolute monarchy of Siam sought to shore up some of its failing popularity by building the first self-consciously modern cinema in Southeast Asia, the Sala Chaloem Krung.”⁸⁰ With the use of air-conditioning and modern building styles, the theater was a sign of the royal role in nation-building and technological progress. Audiences acted as spectators not only to the films displayed on the screen itself, but also to royal authority and physical displays of national development.⁸¹

The king also helped create the Saha Cinema Company, which, after buying the previously dominant Siam Film Company, became the largest film company in Thailand until the Second World War. As I will discuss in further detail in chapter three, the 1930 Film Act institutionalized government oversight of film production, importation, exhibition, and advertising. Under Prajadhipok the “cinema trade and distribution business was now almost completely under the control of the government and the absolute monarchy.”⁸² Yet it was too late to save the absolute monarchy. On the morning of 24 June 1932, the Khana Ratsadon, or the People’s Party, took over the government in Bangkok while Prajadhipok was at the vacation palace in Hua Hin. The absolute monarchy was overthrown, and its place taken by a constitutional monarchy.

The 1932 coup inaugurated a tumultuous period in politics in Thailand. Two of the members of the *Khana Ratsadon* would come to dominate politics until the 1950s, namely Phibun and Pridi Phanomyong. One of the first orders of business after the coup, and indeed for

⁷⁹ Ibid, 78.

⁸⁰ Chua, “Absolutism and Air-Conditioning,” 217.

⁸¹ Chua, “Building Siam,” 207.

⁸² Dome Sukwong, *History of Thai Film*, 10-11.

all subsequent governments, was to legitimize the new government in the court of public opinion. By 1932, official use of cinema for political propaganda was well established. In fact, in the area of film production there was a great deal of continuity from the royal government to that of the People's Party. The Wasuwat brothers, for example, received support from the People's Party because of their personal connections in that faction. They were commissioned to make a documentary of the People's Party victory. However, the film was never completed, a reflection of the internal factionalism and jockeying that followed the party's ascent to rule. Meanwhile, the new government abolished the Topical Film Service as a royal ministry and in its place created the Film Section under the Department of Public Information.⁸³ Otherwise, cinema in the 1930s generally was marked by a continuation of elite and government domination of the production of film and cinema business.

One of the most notable official productions of the decade was the documentary-style *Luat thahan thai* (Undaunted Sons of Siam), released in 1935 to play at the Sala Chaloem Krung Theater.⁸⁴ In addition to being the best venue in town, the appropriation of the royal theater was redolent with political symbolism. The film was produced by the Ministry of Defense with the guidance of both Phibun, who was the then Minister of Defense, and Luang Wichit Wathakan, the minister of propaganda, in order to promote the Thai military.⁸⁵ The film was about a group of men and women engaged in military service when a war breaks out. Ultimately, Thailand is victorious. The film reflected Phibun's personal influence. He devoted significant resources to the project.⁸⁶ It foreshadowed his promotion of militaristic nationalism, and his belief that war

⁸³ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 58.

⁸⁴ *Luat Thahan Thai (Undaunted Sons of Siam)* (Public Relations Department, Ministry of Defense, Phapphayon Siang Srikrung, 1935). When films have official English language titles, I use those rather than direct translation. *Luat Thahan Thai*, translated literally, means "the blood of Thai soldiers."

⁸⁵ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Film and Politics: Luat Thahan Thai-Prachao Changphuak-Banrai Narao (Phapphayon Kap Kanmuang: Luat Thahan Thai-Phrachao Changphuak-Banrai Narao)* (Bangkok: Phumpanya, 1999), 33.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

was unavoidable.⁸⁷ Accompanied by martial music and showcasing battle scenes, the film drew on nationalistic and martial themes established after the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The production of the film was in keeping with the promotion of the arts under Phibun and Luang Wichit. Luang Wichit in particular was instrumental in reviving the Department of Fine Arts after 1933, which had been marginalized under King Prajadhipok.

Under Phibun's tenure as Prime Minister first from 1938 to 1944 and again from 1948 to 1957, the Thai government made films to promote national sentiment and official activities. The politicization of the popular and fine arts for political ends and propaganda was a global trend, especially amongst the fascist regimes of Europe that Phibun and Luang Wichit were known to admire. As historian E. Bruce Reynolds reported, "During World War II the director general of the Thai Publicity Department, Phairot Chayanam, acknowledged... that his agency had been modeled on the Reich Propaganda Ministry," and claimed that "'just as in Germany, Thailand has centralized as far as possible the issuing of government news, enlightenment and propaganda'."⁸⁸ Reynolds also showed that Phibun and Luang Wichit actively admired and used models from the Japanese empire and Chiang Kai-shek.⁸⁹ These years emphasize the flexibility of Luang Wichit's loyalties, as years later he would work with Sarit to revitalize the monarchy.

Luat Thahan Thai was just the beginning of a number of productions and film events sponsored by the Thai government. But it's worth pondering if these projects met with controversy within the domestic film industry. In the early 1930s, members of royal and noble families still made up most of the existing filmmaking community. Intriguingly, the need by the government to produce film materials supporting the new order may have resulted to some extent

⁸⁷ Ibid, 35.

⁸⁸E. Bruce Reynolds, "Phibun Songkhram and Thai Nationalism in the Fascist Era," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2004): 109-110.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 112-113.

in increased sponsorship for commoner filmmakers and film companies, including those owned by Chinese families. Indeed, one of the first productions was designed to sell the 1932 revolution. Sponsored in 1934 by the Office of Propaganda (*Samnakngan khosanakan*), the film itself was made by the Siam Cinema Company.⁹⁰ The Siam Cinema Company was owned by Siaw Songuan Sibunruang, the very man that Vajiravudh had attempted to compete with in the 1920s. Ultimately, however, the government took control over another former royally operated film company, the United Cinematograph Company, in order to ensure state control over the cinematic public sphere.

In 1934, for example, the United Cinematograph showed the film *The Battle*, translated into Thai as *Rak chat ying chip* (Loving the Nation More than Existence), to Thai Navy audiences in order to promote loyalty.⁹¹ Phibun had identified military audiences as particular target groups to be both courted and shown materials supportive of the new regime. This went beyond issues directly related to military matters. In 1933, Phibun had requested the production of two films intended for military audiences, apparently titled *Chalong ratthathamnun* (Celebrating the Constitution) and *Kanplianplaeng pokkhrong meua wan thi 24 mithuna* (Changes in Governance on 24 June).⁹² Phibun's focus on the military and his use of propaganda to ally them to his form of government revealed the extent to which his rise to power was connected to the military. Indeed, military loyalties to Phibun would keep him in power through the next two decades, despite turbulence brought on by a world war, regicide, and major political infighting amongst members of the 1932 coup group. His early involvement with propaganda, even before his rise to premiership, also prefaced his infamous cultural mandates and extensive

⁹⁰ NA [3] ส 0201.53/10.

⁹¹ NA [3] ส 0201.53/10.

⁹² NA [3] ส 0201.53/10.

attempts to inculcate nationalism in the Thai population.

Some of the films were, ultimately, too politically sensitive to be publicly released. In fact, *Changes in Governance*, produced by Manit Wasuwat and Luang Konkan Chaenchit, was never allowed to be screened to the public after a complaint by then Prime Minister (and former Privy councilor to Vajiravudh) Phraya Manopakon Nitithada that the film “was inappropriate to be shown in theaters because of the derision would cause hurt, or to put it another way, pound down the nail, and be excessively traumatic to the king and members of the royal family.” In the end, the film was taken into government possession, and Manit Wasuwat given ฿4,000.⁹³ While the film did not end up being shown, the decision clearly indicates an anti-royalist character to at least some of the post-1932 productions.

The years leading to the Second World War saw Pridi and Phibun’s rivalry coalesce into a cinematic duel. In 1941, while he was serving as Minister of Finance, Pridi released his English-language *Prachao chang pheuak* (The King of the White Elephant) to play at the Sala Chaloem Krung.⁹⁴ The film was produced in English and premiered in New York and Singapore.⁹⁵ It a clear attempt to influence international perceptions of Thailand as a peaceful nation. The film depicted an Ayutthaya king forced to go to war with Hongsawadi. The strongly anti-war themes were a clear rebuke of Phibun’s relationship with the Japanese and European fascist regimes.

Interestingly, the film seemed to have cloaked itself in the legitimacy of the monarchy and cultural departments, with one of the title screens saying, “We are deeply obliged and hereby show our appreciation to the Royal Household and Fine Arts Departments of Thailand for the assistance kindly rendered.” Moreover, the royal association with white elephants and the films’

⁹³ NA [3] สส 0201.53/10.

⁹⁴ Pridi Phanomyong, *Phrachao Chang Pheuak (The King of the White Elephant)* (Pridi Phapphayon, 1941).

⁹⁵ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Film and Politics*, 39.

use of a wise monarchy to deliver its message further amplified the changing dynamics of royal politics. Considering Pridi's reputation as a staunch anti-royalist, the inclusion of royal symbolism is somewhat surprising.

On December 8th, 1941, Japanese forces crossed over into Thailand from Indochina while simultaneously landing along the Kra Peninsula, as a prelude to the invasion of British colonies in Malaya and Burma. On the 21st of December, Tokyo and Bangkok signed a mutual offensive-defensive alliance pact. By way of the agreement, Japan had full access to Thai transportation infrastructure, communication networks, weapons, and military facilities. Rising militarization also changed the use of film by the government. Phibun backed the production of *Ban rai na rao* (Our Land), which was released in April 1942.⁹⁶ The film, like others before it, premiered at the Sala Chaloem Krung, as well as the Odeon Theater. It combined themes of military duty, agricultural devotion, and loyalty to nation to present an image of a simultaneously agricultural and militaristic society where citizens were obeisant to the central state. Eventually, the Japanese had approximately 150,000 troops stationed in Thailand, although Thailand was never officially occupied. In return, Japan, then in control of most of Southeast Asia, granted territory to Thailand along its North, Northeast, and Southern borders, the so-called "Lost Territories."

While the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia was characterized by brutality and violence, including widespread rape of "comfort women," their presence in Thailand was comparatively without incident. However, Japanese attempts at cultural influence were extensive. According to a report from the US Office of Strategic Services, the Japanese government had attempted to influence Thai public opinion through cultural exchange since the early 1930s. As the author observed, "in one sense the three thousand Japanese in Bangkok on

⁹⁶ Thong In and Neramit, *Ban Rai Na Rao (Our Land)* (Kong Phapphayon Than Akat, 1942).

invasion day were all cultural agents prepared to sell collaboration and co-prosperity to the Thai.”⁹⁷ During the war, cultural exchange was formalized with the Japan-Thailand Cultural Agreement treaty, ratified in Thailand on December 21st, 1942. The treaty, which had fourteen articles detailing the various types of cultural exchange between the two countries, declared that Japan and Thailand would:

Endeavor to supply the other, in as large quantities and as frequently as possible, with publications, cinematographic films, lantern slides, photographs, gramophone records and musical scores of this country which it deems contributory to promoting the mutual knowledge and understanding between the two countries, and the other shall give special consideration as to their preservation, distribution, presentation and exhibition so that these may be utilized effectively in its country.⁹⁸

Based on the available evidence, it is fair to surmise that the exchange of material was generally a one-way transaction. It is, however, quite possible that Phibun, having a front-seat position to Japanese propaganda, would have taken the lessons from the war into the 1950s.

However, growing concerns regarding the Phibun government and recognition that Japan was losing the war led to widespread dissatisfaction with the relationship. In 1944, the National Assembly forced Phibun out, and replaced him with Khuang Aphaiwongse, who was secretly allied with the Seri Thai.⁹⁹ The resistance achieved some victories between 1944 and 1945. But at the time of the Japanese surrender, Thailand was still technically allied with Japan and at war with some the Allied Powers, although not with the United States.

The years from the start of World War II through to the early fifties seemed to bring a lull in Thai propaganda film production. While the Japanese released propaganda films during their occupation in Southeast Asia, domestic production was severely limited. Many domestic

⁹⁷ *Japanese Domination of Thailand*, vol. R & A No. 2368 (Office of Strategic Services: Research and Analysis Branch, 1944), no page.

⁹⁸ *Japanese Domination of Thailand*, no page.

⁹⁹ The Seri Thai, or Free Thai, was an underground movement to resist the Japanese. It allied itself with the Allied powers.

producers and cinemas went out of business.¹⁰⁰ The cinema business took some time to recover.

It was only from the mid-fifties that there is once again evidence of government production of films. By that time, however, the domestic and international political context had changed.

Phibun had returned to power after a 1947 coup by Royal Thai Army units. But going into the 1950s, Phibun's grasp was tentative. To maintain power, he first had to carefully balance different factions of the government and military. He also allied Thailand with the United States in the fight against communism in Asia, which I will discuss further in chapter two. The alliance resulted in significant economic and military aid, and thus bolstered both the Thai military and Phibun's own government.

In 1952, Phibun announced the new Ministry of Culture (re-established from the National Institute of Culture from his previous government), intended to promote Thai arts and culture.¹⁰¹ The ministry was created in large part to foster a uniform national culture. The same year, Thailand's first television broadcast, by the Public Relations Department and backed by Police Chief Lt. Gen Phao Sriyanond, showcased "Thai" culture through dancing and singing.¹⁰² New 1952 censorship laws were applied to films as the Interior Ministry sought to promote "conservative, traditional and submissive morals, encouraging obedience and 'true entertainment.'"¹⁰³

Around the same time, efforts to use film to promote Thailand's image abroad increased. In 1953, for example, the government produced a film intended to promote Buddhism in advance of the 1957 celebration of 2500 years since the passing of Buddha. While the films showcased

¹⁰⁰ Dome Sukwong, *History of Thai Film*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Maurizio Peleggi, "Refashioning Civilization: Dress and Bodily Practice in Thai Nation-Building," in *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas* (Brighton [England]: Sussex Academic, 2007), 76.

¹⁰² Grossman, *Chronicle of Thailand*, 60-63.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 70. Phibun's policy during this period was a continuation of his ultranationalist campaigns and mandates during the 1930s.

“Thai” Buddhist morality, culture, and customs, it was explicitly intended to be shown to international audiences as well. In fact, the government memo introducing the project reads something like a missionary statement, that the government would make the film “in order to propagate (Thai Buddhism) in foreign countries as part of the organization of the celebrations in the year B.E. 2500.” Notably, amongst the scenes to be included in the film, such as famous sites and religious individuals, the government highlighted royal religious activities. These two aspects of the film, the internationalization of the audience and the inclusion of royal religious patronage (and by extension legitimation of the role of the monarchy in the culture of the country), would come to characterize official and commercial filmmaking through the 1970s.

In July 1955, Bangkok hosted the first International Information Film Festival (IIFF) in Lumpini Park. Intended to strengthen the friendship between the foreign residents of the diplomatic community in Bangkok and Thai people, participating countries were invited to submit 16mm films of less than thirty minutes that would showcase each of the individual countries. Of course, the films would be prescreened for approval by the Thai government. The festival included films from fifteen countries, including the United States, Germany, Japan, India, South Vietnam, Australia, and Indonesia. The three-day event was attended by large crowds and viewed by the government as a major success.¹⁰⁴

Although the Thai government hosted the event, it was paid for in full by the Japanese Embassy in Bangkok. It is likely that the inspiration for Japan’s support for the festival was similar to that of forming the Southeast Asian Film Festival a year earlier. In some respects, Thailand was the ideal staging ground for its reengagement with the region. Thailand and Japan maintained generally positive relations. Indeed, the Thai submission to the program showcased

¹⁰⁴ NA [3] ส ๕ 0201.53/39.

that relationship, as it was filmed during Phibun's visit to Japan in that same year.

However, the mid-1950s saw a simultaneous intensification of Cold War dynamics, especially in Southeast Asia, and the increased role of the US in Thailand. The newspaper *Siam Nikhon* reported in September 1954 that the Ministry of the Interior called a meeting from the twenty-fourth to the thirtieth of that month to train all provincial governors in aspects of psychological warfare.¹⁰⁵ The growing influence of the United States in Thailand was already evident at the IIFF. The American exhibition featured a Cinerama (a new widescreen process that utilized three synchronized projectors and a large, curved screen), which had previously showed in Bangkok at the International Trade Fair as part of Eisenhower's initiative to showcase American culture abroad. Memos circulated in advance of meetings to plan for the cinerama reminded officials to dress appropriately and maintain courtesy "to protect the honor of the bureaucracy."¹⁰⁶ These interactions highlighted recognition of the need to present a respectable Thai face to the world.

Even the ill-fated 1958 elections were promoted through film exhibitions. *Siam Rath* reported on a tactic supported by then Minister of the Interior Lt.-General Praphat Charusethian, whereby "in addition to usual methods used to encourage the people to the polls, special films will be shown in all theaters. These films are comedies and star comedians have been engaged to take part in them, the stories of which are not only amusing but also emphasize to the people the importance of going to the polls to vote."¹⁰⁷ Editorializing, *Siam Rath Weekly Review* remarked that "this new plan of the authorities to show films acted by popular and well-known comedians as the means by which to encourage the people to go to the polls and vote only seems to indicate the objective to show that elections and Thai democracy are in reality a comedy with no meaning

¹⁰⁵ USIA Thai Press Summary, September 19, 1954.

¹⁰⁶ NA [3] ส ๕ 0201.53/39.

¹⁰⁷ *Siam Rath*, quoted in *Siam Rath Weekly Review*, 4 March 1958, 3.

whatever.”¹⁰⁸ This assessment seemed right, as only a short period later, in October 1958, the elections were invalidated in Sarit’s auto-coup. The next elections were not held until 1969.

Official campaigns to promote Thailand’s image abroad were sporadic in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the government’s attitude towards the exhibition of films abroad was evident in an incident involving the Thai filmmaker, Rat Pettanyi. Now regarded as the “father of contemporary Thai cinema,” Rat was one of the first Thai filmmakers actively showing his films abroad. In 1954, Rat took part in the first Southeast Asian Film Festival in Tokyo. Like the IIFF, the festival was inaugurated that year as a Japanese-led effort to create a pan-Asian film industry, as well as to open the Southeast Asia market for Japanese films. The initiative was somewhat contentious, given that less than a decade earlier Japan’s presence in Southeast Asia was characterized by brutal imperialism. Indeed, Indonesia ultimately declined to participate due to concerns over the restoration of diplomatic relations. Given Thailand’s different experience of the period, however, Thai filmmakers participation was far less contentious.

Rat submitted his film *Santi-Vina* (named for the lead characters, Santi and Vina) to the festival, making it the first feature length Thai film to be shown at an international film festival.¹⁰⁹ Produced especially for the festival, the film was shot in color on 35mm film stock, a first for Thailand. With the largest budget for any Thai film up to that date, the film was technological progressive in an era dominated by 16mm film. *Santi-Vina* used some common melodrama themes (class-differences between lovers, forced marriage, family arguments, etc.) to deliver a Buddhist morality tale. The film also displayed the Tham Khao Luang Cave in Phetchaburi, which has since become a famous tourist attraction. Although each country was

¹⁰⁸ *Siam Rath Weekly Review*, March 13, 1958, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Marut, *Santi-Vina* (Hanuman Phapphayon, 1954).

permitted five entries, Rat's film was the only submission from Thailand. The film received critical praise at the Southeast Asian Film Festival, a real accomplishment given the Japanese disregard for most of the Southeast Asian entries. It also received three awards, including the Golden Harvest Award for Best Photography, Best Art Direction, and the Special AMPP Award for Best Culture film. For the last award, Rat personally received a Mitchell movie camera.

Initially, the Thai government, specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, greeted the film and the awards it won with great pleasure. Indeed, because Rat had to return early to Bangkok before the awards ceremony, the Royal Thai Ambassador to Japan, Luang Phinit-Aksorn, accepted Rat's awards and gave a speech. In it, Luang Phinit-Aksorn admitted the limits of the Thai film industry, but also asserted the ways that *Santi-Vina* displayed Thai culture:

[*Santi-Vina*] is... the first 35 mm color picture ever made in our country; and therefore the achievement of Mr. [Pettanyi] in winning the best photography award is the more remarkable. Our film company flew out the sensitive Eastman Color film from Rochester; we kept it refrigerated on location in the tropical climate of the Thai rice fields; each weekend, we flew the exposed film to Tokyo for developing. And so, the production under unusually difficult conditions proceeded, eight weeks of shooting in the provinces, rice fields and deep in beautiful Khao Luang Cave, a natural cave, which is a spectacular temple with gold-leafed [Buddha], stalagmites, stalactites and dripping walls of every hue.

This is what the Thai producers sought to bring to you- these extraordinary scenes with this simple moving story of a boy, a girl and a priest. And these are the conditions under which our film was produced. As someone not involved in the production, may I say as a proud Thai that these are my people, these are their customs, these are their ceremonies; this is indeed my land.¹¹⁰

For most of the talk, the ambassador spoke of the film as a communal production, "our" film.

Ignoring the reality of how little the government actually did to support producers like Rat, the ambassador asserted the production of the film as emerging from the particular conditions of the Thai cinema industry and Thailand's hot and humid climate in order to show the world the

¹¹⁰ Far East Film News, May 21 and 28, 1954, 35.

beauty and culture of the Thai people and countryside (and soon-to-be tourist attractions).

In a letter reporting the success of the film at the festival, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that the film had “made a very famous name for Thailand in the Japanese film industry and for foreigners in Tokyo.”¹¹¹ The news was even reported directly to Phibun. But then, in an about face, the government fined Rat for screening his film abroad without first clearing it with the censors. The incident is frequently referenced in histories of Thai cinema, and often used as an example of the government’s lack of support for Thai cinema. While that assertion is true, the exchanges and reactions that took place afterwards revealed the recognition, at least in some quarters, that international film festivals could be useful for broader efforts to promote the image of the country. While Rat was punished for violating strict censorship and importation laws, his overseas activities were in fact supported and praised by the government.

Moreover, Rat’s assistance to the Office of the Prime Minister in 1957 indicates that Rat maintained good relations with the government, despite the 1954 incident and his own objections to the lack of direct government support for the domestic film industry. In January 1957, Rat was contacted by the political division of the Office of the Prime Minister to provide advice for the production of two film projects. The films, titled *The Power of Sacrifice* and *The Power of Love*, were jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Office of the Prime Minister. Upon receiving the request, with only the names of the films to accompany it, Rat replied politely, if also perhaps tersely:

According to the letter... the Prime Minister in his position as the President of the Ministry for National Culture has ordered the Board of National Culture to produce a film about *The Power of Sacrifice* and *The Power of Love*, and has given me the honor of asking my advice and assistance in the production of those two films. Therefore, I do not want to miss thanking you for the opportunity.

The production of a film is a large task and requires resolving several details:

¹¹¹ [3]สร 0201.53/33.

1. The plot
2. Is it to be made as a play or a film?
3. Acting
4. Will it be done elaborately or frugally?
5. Are there any aims for screenings in foreign countries, or not? For example.¹¹²

Rat also suggested a meeting to discuss the plans further. At that time, Phibun was Prime Minister, with Sarit's coup still eight months away. By the time of the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels, the government would once again hope to showcase Thai culture through film.

When the Brussels World's Fair opened on 17 April 1958, the ideological stakes of the event were made clear by the adjacent positions of the United States and Soviet Union pavilions. Although they were just two of the fifty national pavilions and eight international exhibits showcased at the fair, their central position highlighted the importance of cultural diplomacy in the conflict between the two nations.¹¹³ The use of cultural diplomacy came to prominence as psychological warfare emerged as an important component of President Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles' "New Look" strategy after 1955. In part, this strategy was adopted with the acknowledgement that the use of force (and resulting casualties) to combat the Soviet Union was not a politically feasible option.¹¹⁴ Cold War and military historian John Lewis Gaddis argued that for the Eisenhower administration, psychological warfare "meant simply a robust faith in the efficacy of public posture: The belief that by merely making pronouncements and striking poses, the United States could increase the difficulties under which its adversaries operated."¹¹⁵ Psychological warfare specifically, and cultural diplomacy broadly, were related exercises aimed at the destabilization of Communist Party-led governments and an important strategy in

¹¹² NA [3]๙๐ 0201.53/57.

¹¹³ Sarah Nilsen, *Projecting America, 1958: Film and Cultural Diplomacy at the Brussels World's Fair* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011), 9.

¹¹⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 152-155.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 152.

preventing communism from spreading into vulnerable areas like Thailand. It was in this atmosphere that the 1958 World's Fair commenced.

For the Thai government, the world's fair represented an important demonstration of Thai culture, sophistication, and its position in the world order. As the *Siam Nikon* newspaper reported, the Thai Office of the Prime Minister had proposed Thailand's participation in the fair in order to "promote the art and reputation of the country."¹¹⁶ The approach had historical precedent. Historian Thongchai Winichakul has discussed how the Siamese elite used the world's fairs in the beginning of the twentieth century, writing that, "They believed that their participation in those major fairs would increase their recognition and elevate their status in the eyes of the world. Yet they appropriated exhibitions, museums and the World's Fairs in the ways they understood them and saw their benefits."¹¹⁷ This attitude was likewise evident in the 1958 fair. As one reporter related,

I came across a picture of a Thai temple that was prominently placed and adjacent with a picture of a Russian building on the left side and American on the right. And the poster didn't cut the picture of the Thai temple at all. It shows that a picture of a tiny Thai temple in little country that nobody knows can be praised in importance alongside buildings of Russian and the United States.¹¹⁸

But Thailand's position in 1958 was different from the one faced by Siamese governments at the turn of the century. With colonialism on the wane and the new Cold War order emerging, the Thai government saw opportunities for international alliances that were mutually beneficial. Certainly, by 1958 Thailand had firmly allied itself with the United States, on the side of capitalist democracies in the fight against international communism. At the start of

¹¹⁶ Samon Samnokkrittana, "Thai Dramatic Arts in Brussels," *Siam Nikon*, August 15, 1958, page unknown. Accessed in NA๑๕ 0701.9.5.1/105 [28]

¹¹⁷ Thongchai Winichakul, "The Quest for 'Siwilai': A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (August 1, 2000): 540.

¹¹⁸ Samon Samnakritana, "Nat Sinlapa Thai nai Brussels (Thai Dancers in Brussels)," *Siam Nikon*, August 15, 2501, page unknown. Accessed in NA๑๕ 0701.9.5.1/105 [28]

the World's Fair in April 1958, Sarit had already staged a successful coup against Phibun, an action that ultimately strengthened the relationship between the Thai and US governments.¹¹⁹

Press coverage in Thailand of the fair increased in the lead-up to "Thailand Day," on September 10th. The Thai exhibition featured a large sala, which was becoming an architectural symbol of Thai culture during this period. In 1967, for example, King Bhumibol dedicated a sala at the East-West Center in Hawaii. Yet it also asserted a traditional image of Thai culture, and became intricately connected to tourist images of Thai aesthetic and religious life. Aside from the architectural exhibit, the government also sent two films for showing, *Thailand* and *Niw Petch* (The Diamond Finger), both produced by Rat. The film screening held within the Thai exhibit exemplified the priorities of the new regime.¹²⁰ The combined features of the Thai exhibit, with a traditional *sala*, the tourist-oriented *Thailand*, display of traditional Thai dance and folklore in *The Diamond Finger*, and attendance of the king and queen reveal the combined force of Thailand's modern image. These features are all apparent in Thailand's contemporary tourist promotions and official attempts at image control. These were evident from the 1950s onwards, and the Brussels World's Fair acted as Thailand's big coming out.

Today, Rat is best known for his commercial work. But in 1958, he undertook three documentary films that were produced by the Ministry of Fine Arts. The films, titled *Thamachak* (The Wheel of Dharma), *Thailand*, and *Niw petch* (The Diamond Finger), explored different aspects of Thailand's cultural heritage. *Thamachak*, for example, explored symbolic representations of *dhamma* in historical wheel carvings. *Thailand* was a tourist-oriented film promoting cultural and historic sites in the nation. Although Rat is often remembered by historians of cinema in Thailand for his criticisms of the government, he also worked extensively

¹¹⁹ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 87.

¹²⁰ Rat Pettanyi, *Niw Petch (The Diamond Finger)* (Department of Fine Arts, 1958).

with government projects.

The Diamond Finger, like the other two films, was a collaboration between Rat's Hanuman Film studio and the Department of Fine Arts. The film employed forty-four of the nation's best classical dancers to depict a story from the Ramakian. The drama was accompanied by classical Thai ensemble music, with both music and narration kept minimal in order to highlight the dancing.¹²¹ The film depicted the story of Nontook, a small god working at the foot of Khao Krailat. His job is to wash the feet of the greater gods before they ascend the mountain to pay homage to Phra Isuan. But the gods tease Nontook and abuse him, causing him to seek revenge. He asks for a blessing from Phra Isuan, who granted him a diamond finger with the power of death. Whenever Nontook points the finger at anyone, it causes them to die. But Nontook uses it to terrorize the gods, and kills a number of them. To stop him, Phra Narayan disguises himself as a young female dancer, and asks Nontook to dance alongside him. As Nontook mimics his movements, Phra Narayan points to his knee. Nontook, doing the same, accidentally kills himself.

The film was narrated in English by Kukrit Pramoj, a prominent scholar and politician who would go on to play Thailand's Prime Minister in the 1963 Hollywood film, *The Ugly American*, and become the actual Prime Minister from 1975 to 1976. Kukrit's great interest in *khon* drama likely inspired his participation. Indeed, his *Siam Rath Weekly Review* put out an extensive issue on the production, including extensive praise for the project's support for *khon*.¹²² The English narrative is the most obvious indication that the film was intended to showcase Thailand's art and culture to international audiences. One newspaper critique commented favorably that, "I know that one manager of a very large Western company went so far as to

¹²¹ Rong Wongsawan, "Narayana Subjugating Nontook," *Siam Rath Weekly Review*, August 7, 1958, 8.

¹²² Ibid.

circulate a notice to the authorities that every Westerner in the company should go to see the film. It was art so pure as to be comprehensible no matter what your nationality or language.”¹²³

Referring to both *Thailand* and *The Diamond Finger*, another newspaper, *Phuean Ban*, put it thus:

Regarding these films, normally Westerners come to Thailand to make films in our country. They choose what to film and follow the Western vision... for example trash or a shabby house. But this film that we have made ourselves is because we want to give let them see the truth of what we have, Mr. Rat Pettanyi of Hanuman Films. These films perhaps are not so peculiar or special in the eyes of Thai people, because we see things in them everyday. But when Westerners see, they will want to see Thailand, want to see the real image.¹²⁴

Before the film was eventually released domestically, Kukrit wrote a review, saying that, “It has been mentioned already that the film *The Diamond Finger* is comparable to an export, produced for foreign customers. The film circulated extensively around the globe, playing at international film festivals, such as in Berlin and San Francisco.”¹²⁵ That the film is now introduced to show in Thailand is to test whether domestic customers like this new production or not.”¹²⁶ The film did indeed show for one screening in Bangkok.¹²⁷ In November 1958, the Department of Fine Arts requested that both *The Diamond Finger* and *Thailand* be aired on television, so that more Thai would have the opportunity to see them. They also suggest that showing the films would “promote (*song soerm*) the art and culture (*watthanatham*) of the Thai people.”¹²⁸ However, the Arts Department declined. The primary reason was that they were not in possession of the actual films, since they were being shown in the United States.

The department also cautioned that the films were inappropriate for television, since they

¹²³ Chao Krung, 2 November 1958. NA๙๙ 0701.9.5.1/105 [28]

¹²⁴ Phuean Ban, “Thai Art Enters the West,” 1958. NA๙๙ 0701.9.5.1/105 [28]

¹²⁵ Cornell University’s Southeast Asia Program attempted to buy a copy of the film, but it was too expensive. NA๙๙ 0701.9.5.

¹²⁶ Kukrit Pramoj, “The Film *Diamond Finger*,” Siam Rat, 13 September 1958. NA๙๙ 0701.9.5.1/105 [28]

¹²⁷ NA๙๙ 0701.9.5.1/98 [2]

¹²⁸ NA๙๙ 0701.9.5.1/98 [2]

were best seen in color (rather than TV's black and white). In other words, the films needed better technology to be fully appreciated. Furthermore, according to the department, "The department created these films according to the tastes (*rot niyom*) of Europeans and Americans and to show in Europe and American in particular. Were the films to be shown on television, which is mostly watched by Thais, it might not receive favor from Thais, because their tastes are different."¹²⁹ Instead, the department suggested that Public Relations hire the dancers directly. The comment revealed a high degree of consciousness regarding the tastes of different audiences. Even as Hollywood films dominated domestic cinemas, the department nonetheless presumed that Thai tastes were distinct from Western ones.

Many of Thailand's prominent cultural and political figures were present at the screening of *The Diamond Finger* at the Brussels exhibition. Thanom Kittikachorn, for example, attended with his wife. But none was so significant as King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit. The king's presence in the government exhibition was notable, considering that just the previous year he had chosen not to attend celebrations for the Twenty-Fifth Centennial Buddhist Celebrations, apparently to demonstrate his "annoyance" at Phibun.¹³⁰ Indeed, the initial period after King Bhumibol's ordination has been marked by tension with Phibun's government. The biography of the king, *A Life's Work*, reported that:

"The king now speaks with some bitterness about the early years of his reign, though without mentioning names," Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times* reported in a lengthy profile in 1989. "When I'd open my mouth and suggest something, they'd say: 'Your Majesty, you don't know anything,' the king recalls. "So I shut my mouth. I know things, but I shut my mouth. They don't want me to speak, so I don't speak."¹³¹

Bhumibol's public role and visibility did increase despite the tension with Phibun. His

¹²⁹ นาถ 0701.9.5.1/98 [2]

¹³⁰ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 205.

¹³¹ Nicholas Grossman, ed., *King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work: Thailand's Monarchy in Perspective* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2011), 99.

coronation and marriage were filmed by M.C. Sukarawannadis Diskul, formerly of the Royal State Railways Film unit, and shown at cinemas throughout the country. Shortly after, His Majesty's Private Film Unit was established to document royal activities. When King Bhumibol ordained as a monk, the ceremony was captured for USIS cameras. The resulting film, *The Ordination of the King of Thailand (Phrabatsomdet phrajaoyuhua sadet ok phanuat)* entered into the regular circulation of USIS films. Even as the king withheld public shows of cooperation with Phibun, the monarchy found other ways to promote the institution.

The association between the king, queen and film would develop further over subsequent decades. For a least three years, from 1964 to 1966, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit presided over the *Tukata thong* film awards, the first major annual film awards in Thailand. The pair were seated at the front of the awards area and personally handed out the awards, much as they did with university degrees. Between 1954 and 1976, the pair saw some ninety-one films, both Thai and Western. The Thai films included Rat's *Santi-Vina* (1954) and *Phrae dam* (Black Silk) (1961), as well as other hits like *Ruen phae* (House Boat) (1961), *Nguen, Nguen, Nguen* (Money, Money, Money) (1965), and *Mae nak phra khanong* (1970). After the last appearance at the Sala Chaloem Thai theater to see *Phaen din khong rao* (Our Land) in 1976, it appears that the next film that the king and queen publicly attended was 2001's *Suriyothai*.¹³²

More broadly, King Bhumibol also became more and more involved in public projects, especially development initiatives aimed at improving livelihoods and modernizing the country. In 1955, he and Queen Sirikit became the first Chakri monarchs to visit Isan in a 19-day tour by road and rail.¹³³ Apparently the king's popularity during this trip greatly alarmed Phibun.¹³⁴ Bhumibol's prominence in promoting the developmental agenda and his visits to Isan would

¹³² Thai Film Archives, "When the King Went to the Movies." Print Publication.

¹³³ Grossman, *A Life's Work*, 104.

¹³⁴ Thak, *Despotic Paternalism*, 205.

grow with the government of Sarit Thanarat, who overthrew Phibun in the 1957 coup. As Thak Chaloemtiarana explained,

The Sarit Coup Group also had little historical basis for legitimacy compared with the leaders of the 1932 Revolution, whose claim to power rested on constitutionalism and their role in overthrowing absolute monarchy.... Sensing the instability of its own foundation, the Sarit clique turned to the throne for support and legitimacy.... Sarit proclaimed to the press and public that his position was legal because the king had given his approval and had presented Sarit with a document, which was immediately displayed. Thus in 1957, the monarchy had the function of legitimizing a new political leadership.

As a result, the development of the monarchy as a political institution saw rapid progress after 1957. The Sarit regime made conscious efforts to give the king more exposure domestically and internationally. As the prestige of the king increased, the government's popularity grew. Under Sarit's leadership, elaborate tours of the country and foreign countries were arranged for representatives of the monarchy, traditional ceremonies were revived, the national day was changed to coincide with the king's birthday, and the royal family was encouraged to participate in military affairs.¹³⁵

Thus, the monarchy as a symbol increased in significance, with the ability to confer legitimacy and respect.

Even the selection of a story from the Ramakian was deeply connected to the institution of the monarchy. The standard version of the Ramakian is the one written by the founder of the Chakri dynasty, King Pra Phutthayotfachulalok (1782-1809), or Rama I, in 1785. His revival of the Ramakian, after previous written versions were destroyed during the Burmese sack of Ayutthaya in 1767, was part of his efforts to resuscitate the royal institution and confer legitimacy on the new dynasty. His son and successor, Rama II (1809-1824) created a shortened version more appropriate for stage performance, not dissimilar to the *khon* performed in *The Diamond Finger*.¹³⁶ It was Vajiravudh who drew on the story to take the name Rama to refer to the kings of the dynasty. Thus, when the story was performed in *The Diamond Finger*, it would have immediately recalled the tradition and prestige of the royal institution.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 205.

¹³⁶ Nicanor G. Tiongson, "The Rule of Rama from the Bay of Bengal to the Pacific Ocean," *SPAJA Journal* 10, no. 2 (2000): 13.

With the figures of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit, moreover, the monarchy cast an aura of prestige and sophistication. This was true both domestically and internationally. Thak explained,

To play down the ‘vulgarity’ of his regime, Sarit turned to the king for help. The king had been brought up in Europe since childhood and spoke many languages. He also had a very attractive queen who was well-adjusted to the ways of the West. To enhance the prestige of the country and the government, Sarit therefore arranged elaborate visits for the royal couple.”¹³⁷

The sophistication of the royal pair was also enhanced through bodily practice and their social prestige. As Peleggi observed,

In 1960, with Sarit’s encouragement, the Thai royals undertook a tour of Europe and the USA, during which Queen Sirikit wore fashionable two-piece dresses to match King [Bhumibol’s] suits (which he alternated with dress uniforms). As a result, an image of Thailand’s royals as modern and cosmopolitan, emphasized by their encounters not only with monarchs and heads of state but also with pop idols such as Benny Goodman and Elvis Presley, was projected on the international stage.¹³⁸

Particularly in comparison to Sarit, who was viewed as a rough military man and did not speak English very well, the king and queen presented a sophisticated face to the world.¹³⁹ However, their image was not only due to their position as royalty. It was also because of their sartorial navigation of international and domestic cultural politics.

At home in Thailand, King Bhumibol tended to wear a full uniform, as befitted his status as Head of the Thai Armed Forces (*Chom thap thai*). It drew on a tradition begun under King Mongkut, who imitated the military fashions of nineteenth century European rulers in his adoption of military uniform.¹⁴⁰ Even on Bhumibol’s first visit to Thailand with his brother, King

¹³⁷ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 2007.

¹³⁸ Peleggi, “Refashioning Civilization,” 77.

¹³⁹ Thak, *Despotic Paternalism*. 206.

¹⁴⁰ Peleggi, “Refashioning Civilization,” 68.

Ananda, in 1938, he and his brother wore military dress.¹⁴¹ Queen Sirikit, on the other hand, wore what was coming to be “traditional” Thai dress, including the ankle-length (*phasin*).¹⁴² Here promotion of national dress emphasized the link between female dress and nationalism, all the more so with her status as the “mother” of the nation. Her connection with traditional costumes and the production of Thai textiles would grow in the following decades, and indeed would become a major component of her public works and image.

Thus, the exhibition of *The Diamond Finger* and the arrival of the king and queen was situated within a broader display of Thai national identity. Royal symbolism was prominent. Thailand’s display, for example, included royal paraphernalia, including royal costumes.¹⁴³ The use of royal imagery, however, was not received without complaint. A journalist with *Satri San* criticized the royal photograph displays, writing that they were not appropriate to the dignity of the crown. The reason was that in the painted photograph, the king’s hair was slightly unkempt, unlike in the photograph that it was based on.¹⁴⁴ Regardless, the king and queen imparted significant legitimacy to the event, and domestically to the Sarit government, when they attended the fair and screening of *The Diamond Finger*. With King Bhumibol in fashionable evening wear, a double-breasted, wide shouldered white evening jacket, and Queen Sirikit in a formal, off-the-shoulders black evening dress, the pair appeared comfortably in images of 1950s international social sophistication.

The king and queen were thus part of gendered patterns of national representation at home and abroad. This was most clearly evident with Queen Sirikit, who drew a great deal of attention with her sartorial choices. During the 1960 royal world tour, she was seen as blending

¹⁴¹ William Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King: The True-Life Sequel to The King and I* (London: Constable, 1999), image section.

¹⁴² Peleggi, “Refashioning Civilization,” 77.

¹⁴³ NA ๙๕ 0701.9.5.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

“old and new” styles to showcase the best of Thai modern dress.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, it was largely from this point that Sirikit led changes to feminine national dress that drew on notions of national tradition and heritage. As historian of Thailand Matthew Phillips quoted from the queen’s own reflections on the trip,

...prior to the world tour, there was ‘no typical national dress code like our neighbouring countries, whose native costumes have become well known world-wide, for example, the Indians with their saris, the Chinese with their silk gowns, and the Japanese with their Kimonos’. To prepare for the world tour she had therefore ordered for a ‘search to be made in royal palaces, or noble homes for photographs and portraits of former queens’, so she could study their dress practices, particularly when they were accompanying the King on official visits. But they had found that during the colonial era, queens would generally mix the Western styles with Thai ones, or in some cases would wear Western dress. For her, she explained, this ‘would not be appropriate, and the Western news media would criticize the strange look of our half-Western, half-Thai national dress’. Consequently, after a careful study of pre-colonial dress styles, a new set of costumes were created which could be considered uniquely Thai.¹⁴⁶

While a national costume was likewise developed for men, it received far less notice.

Significantly, the use of military dress, clearly derived from Western traditions, was not looked upon as problematic in the way that a woman wearing Western dress was. The emphasis on national costume was mainly about female costume.

During the world tour, the king and queen visited the United States. The visit was symbolic of the developing ties between the two countries, and foreshadowed the role of the US in promoting the image of the monarchy. As *The New York Times* observed, “The United States feels that no matter what happens, Thailand’s King Bhumibol Adulyadej can unify the country... The United States has helped distribute hundreds of thousands of coloured pictures of the king throughout the country.”¹⁴⁷ The entire trip, from Bangkok to the White House, was captured by the United States Information Agency (USIA) on three reels of Eastman Color-produced film

¹⁴⁵ Matthew Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 182.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 183-185.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Grossman, *A Life’s Work*, 99.

stock. The film, titled *A Sentimental Journey*, depicted the effusive and friendly reception of the royal family by the American people. That the entire affair was filmed indicated another crucial development, namely the use of mass media entertainment to promote carefully cultivated images of national figures and Thailand's position in the world.

The king and queen's visit to the US involved a whirlwind tour, including tours of a nuclear-powered submarine in Hawaii and a Hollywood film set in Los Angeles, where he met Lucille Ball and Bob Hope. On 28 June 1960, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower welcomed King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit at the Washington National Airport. The film emphasized Bhumibol's birth in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while his father studied at Harvard University, to show the monarchy personal ties to the United States. In a speech at the White House, King Bhumibol expressed his affection for the United States, saying, "I was born here in this country, so I can say that the United States is half my motherland. This visit is somewhat of a sentimental journey, and this I feel with quite genuine emotion in coming back here. I say 'coming back here.' I never say 'come' or 'go' to the United States. I say return to the United States. All that emotion gives me the conviction that our visit here will be of great use for the strengthening and reinforcement of the bonds of friendship which have existed for a long time already between the United States and my country."¹⁴⁸

The film went on to highlight other key aspects of the new royal image and Bhumibol's role as the supreme representative of the Thai nation. In various speeches in Washington, the king emphasized Thailand's aim to modernize and eventually become independent of American aid. He visited the United Nations headquarters in New York, where he used Buddhist teachings to discuss the need for international cooperation. From there he visited his birth hospital in

¹⁴⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960-1961: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1, 1960 to January 20, 1961* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2005), 211.

Cambridge, before heading to the Tennessee Valley Authority to examine their system of dams. King Bhumibol would make dams and hydroelectricity a major aspect of his development program for Thailand and especially for the Northeast. In Colorado, Bhumibol met with officers from the United States Air Force Academy for a defense briefing. In all respects, the film showed the US and Thailand as partners in development, international cooperation, and the military fight against communism. King Bhumibol was portrayed as integral to that effort. Moreover, in showing the film in Thailand, the USIA, via the USIS, undoubtedly hoped that the reverence for the monarch would provide legitimacy for their own programs.

By the time the film was used by USIS, the dynamics of psychological operations and propaganda in Thailand were already shifting. With new emphasis on development programs and national modernization, mass audiences and especially provincial audiences mattered significantly more. These audiences were still not politically powerful, at least not in electoral terms. But the imperatives of national development and discourses of national progress and unity meant that provincial populations warranted consideration nonetheless. In these respects, King Bhumibol and the monarchy network was an important symbolic ally. In the next chapter, I will discuss how these programs developed through the mobile film units under the Thai government and USIS during the 1960s.

CHAPTER 2

COLD FIRE: MOBILE INFORMATION AND THE THAI VILLAGE

In 1965 the USIS-produced *Cold Fire* (Fai Yen), the first commercial film made by USIS for the Thai market.¹⁴⁹ *Cold Fire* was an anti-communist film set in a Northeastern village.¹⁵⁰ The film focused on one small, poor village in northeastern Thailand. The film opens by telling viewers that the story is based on true events that occurred in the Northeast of Thailand (*phak tawan ok chiang nuea khong prathet thai*). The use of the long and clumsy “Northeast of Thailand,” rather than its colloquial name, Isan, clearly situated the region and the village within the cultural orbit of the Thai nation and political sphere of Bangkok. The village setting itself, being fictional and without a more specific geographic location, was meant to represent any Northeastern village. The USIS clearly intended the fictional village to be recognizable by Isan audiences as similar to their own.

Despite that, the village in *Cold Fire* was also an idealized one, imagined from the perspectives of those in Washington D.C. and Bangkok. In the imagined village, all the villagers knew their place. The most respected man in the village was the school headmaster, Phon. Villagers came to him for advice on a range of problems, from issues with livestock to sick babies. Phon worked very hard for the village, including with new community development projects led by the Thai government and supported by the United States. However, he worried about the communist soldiers that were active in the area. The communists were spreading propaganda that the government projects were really for military transport and to increase taxation. Phon feared that the communists would destroy everything dear to the Thai nation,

¹⁴⁹ *Cold Fire (Fai Yen)* (United States Information Service, 1965).

¹⁵⁰ The title is based on a children’s game, in which matches are lit, then extinguished just before the childrens’ fingertips get burned. The title was, it seems, a way to suggest that working with communists was “playing with fire.”

especially Thailand's religious culture and reverence for the monarchy.

Meanwhile, Bun Nam, a village youth, was confused about his future. While he professed to love his nation (*rak chat*), he despaired over the poverty in the village and saw no way out for himself. Bun Nam's confusion was compounded by his love for Phin, Phon's daughter. He felt that he was too poor to ever marry her. One evening, when communists raided the village for food, Bun Nam joined them, hoping for a better life. However, he discovered that they were in fact dishonest murderers, with plans to kill Phon and the village monk. Bun Nam escaped from the communists, and warned the police of their plans. The police saved Phon just in time, and captured the communists. The police and Phon forgave Bun Nam, and he was reunited with Phin. Like the beginning, the film ended with the notice that "This film is based off true events in the Northeastern Region of Thailand!"

The idea was the offspring of the USIS and Thai government in order to promote loyalty to the Thai government in provincial areas. It was also part of the massive psychological operations effort that began in the early Cold War period by the United States and Thailand. Psychological operations accompanied the large-scale provincial development and integration programs from the 1950s to 1970s. The programs signaled a wholly new relationship between Thai citizens and the government. With the support of the US, the Thai government sought to physically and economically integrate the periphery to the center in Bangkok through transportation infrastructure, such as the Mittraphap Highway between Bangkok and the northeast, as well as extensive community development, economic aid, and health programs. While those programs linked citizens physically to Bangkok, national modernization was also contingent on the psychological integration of all citizens in Thailand. Isan was an important site in this effort, particularly because, unlike the largely docile villagers in *Cold Fire*, Isan was

historically a site of resistance and source of critical politicians.¹⁵¹

From the mid-1950s onwards, the extensive psychological operations in Thailand echoed similar efforts elsewhere on the frontiers of the global Cold War. Indeed, psychological operations were an integral part of Thailand's entry into the American-led international order. The US and Thai militaries as well as the CIA conducted extensive operations throughout the country. However, from the 1960s to the 1970s the USIS conducted comparatively more significant programs in Thailand that were formative to the development of government-village relations. The USIS program in Thailand was one of the largest in the world, in part because Thailand cooperated extensively with the projects.¹⁵² With Thailand's newfound role as America's closest ally in Southeast Asia, the country and its people became important sites of ideological contestation. However, US support for Thai authoritarian military governments demonstrated the tensions between rhetoric advocating democracy and socio-economic mobility, on the one hand, and the interests of the Thai political and social elite, on the other. Thailand provides a unique case study for how the operation of US objectives interacted with regional and local interests in the context of the Cold War. These interactions resulted in the creation of a modern Thai national identity that, for the first time, was mapped onto the mass body of Thai citizens.

A major program undertaken by the USIS, in cooperation with the Thai government, was the Mobile Team program. The teams were comprised of one USIS officer, Thai civil servants, politicians, and, eventually, doctors and midwives. Travelling to far-flung and tiny villages, usually in Isan, the team would talk with village leaders, assess the needs of the village, and provide medical care. In the evenings, they put on a film show.

¹⁵¹ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 130.

¹⁵² Earl Wilson, G. Lewis Schmidt Interview, 1988, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

Film was a critical medium through which the two governments worked. One 1960 US government study, for example, highlighted why film became a favorite medium in Thailand.

Under ordinary circumstances *motion pictures* lead all media in effectiveness. Keenness for motion pictures is universal in Thailand; in the words of a Thai graduate student in the United States, ‘If we didn’t like the movies, we wouldn’t be Thai.’ This is substantiated by practical experiences. In 1954-1956, by request of the Thai Government, USIS Thailand cooperated in a psychological indoctrination program carried to the village level. The media tested included speeches, posters, pamphlets, leaflets, and movies; and of these, movies had the greatest impact. Since the Thai expect movies to be entertainment, it is not known whether they would respond to direct appeals presented by this medium; however, movies would supply a ready-made audience and might also be useful in creating good will.¹⁵³

This analysis predicted aspects of the mobile team films shows, which often drew thousands of viewers from surrounding villages, and sometimes even from across the Mekhong River in Laos. The films, most of them short documentaries, featured government development efforts, community projects, royal activities, and cultural affairs. Villagers were invited to imagine themselves as members of a developing nation, working together to build the national community. For many, it was the first time that they saw the king or the prime minister, or even a film.

The mobile program and the film screenings reinforced the nationalist and developmental agenda of the central government. Sarit forcefully advocated for Thailand’s development (*patthana*), and in so doing created a civilizational discourse that bound Thailand’s position in the global order to its ability to develop the country’s economy and infrastructure. Sarit also adopted the concepts originally promoted by King Vajiravudh of “nation, religion, monarchy” as the pillars of a Thai identity, but Sarit added the military as defenders of this trinity. In advocating images of national identity, moreover, films like *Cold Fire*, produced gendered forms of participation in the national community. Men like Bun Nam were potential leaders in

¹⁵³ Special Operations Research Office, “Psychological Operations Thailand: Project Prosyms” (The American University, under contract with the Department of the Army, 1960), 74.

modernization efforts, but also threatening in the potential as communists. Women like Phin could never be communists, and were the bearers of social values and cultural tradition.

However, the productive nature of the programs worked in two directions. The focus on provincial audiences was made possible by the specific dynamics of Cold War ideologies and the decision by the Thanom and Sarit governments to pursue relations with the US. With the global fight against communist, the village became a major site of Cold War contestation. These circumstances meant that, in the midst of authoritarian rule and absence of electoral freedoms, the Thai masses nonetheless took on immense importance in national discourses of development, progress, and civilization. Villager loyalties, and the potential for the loss of loyalties to the communists, suddenly mattered in concrete terms. Even as these audiences had little political power, they assumed importance as sites of contestation between “Thai” national identity and communist subversion.

The programs also opened up new spaces for public participation and expressions of needs. As with the sympathetic portrayal of Bun Nam’s conflict, the members of the mobile teams recognized, often uncomfortably, the fact that communists spoke to real village needs and frustrations. While early government efforts focused on spreading information, they also resulted in additional development and aid programs, thereby impacting the material lives of rural Thais. Programs like the mobile teams dramatically expanded the modern role of the central government in providing for common Thais across the nation.

In key respects, Thailand during the 1950s to 1970s was part of what political scientist Peter Katzenstein termed the “American Imperium.” Specifically, the American Imperium was based on the formation of both territorial and non-territorial power. The containment of communism was not simply a matter of geographical containment or economic, diplomatic, or

military policy. A people's way of life, culture, and "civilizational values" become key to Cold War conceptions of security.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the conception highlights America both as an actor, but also part of an American "system of rule in world politics."¹⁵⁵ The system of US rule as well as the territorial and non-territorial dimensions of power in Thailand, and Southeast Asia more generally, has been under-theorized. Only rarely, moreover, do cultural studies intersect with military, economic, or developmental studies, except through passing observations.¹⁵⁶

In Thailand, military bases were linked to the development of infrastructure, especially roads, which then enabled easier transportation and exchange of communications, including films. Their development reflected the underlying logic of the American Imperium: that increasing the access of American entities to the resources and populations of developing countries was of greater significance than seeking direct political control over them.¹⁵⁷ American film studios were some of the most significant transnational corporations that were central in the spread of non-territorial US power.¹⁵⁸ A key element of this chapter is to show how those processes were intertwined. Due to the fact that military bases and economic aid have largely shaped analyses of the American intervention, moreover, taking the circulation and production of film seriously highlights the non-territorial dimensions of the system that drove modern Thai social, cultural, and political development.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Katzenstein, "Japan in the American Imperium: Rethinking Security," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 6, no. 10 (2008): 7. The argument is from his Katzenstein, *World of Regions*.

¹⁵⁵ Katzenstein, "Japan," 2.

¹⁵⁶ Some examples of work that takes popular culture and art seriously as a political and social force include Benedict Anderson, "Introduction to In the Mirror," in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014), 77–99; Matthew Phillips, *Cold War*; Rachel Harrison, "The Man with the Golden Gauntlets: Mit Chaibancha's Insi Thorng and the Confusion of Red and Yellow Perils in Thai Cold War Action Cinema," in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and the Arts in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University Press, 2010), 195–226; Chua, "Building Siam"; Barme, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*; Copeland, "Contested Nationalism."

¹⁵⁷ Katzenstein, "Japan," 2.

¹⁵⁸ Richard De Zoysa and Otto Newman, "Globalization, Soft Power and the Challenge of Hollywood," *Contemporary Politics* 8, no. 3 (September 2002): 188.

It is also instructive of another key aim, namely to situate the changes occurring across Thailand firmly within an international, rather than strictly domestic, context. At the same time that I wish to emphasize the necessary role of domestic politics in the broader American-Thai relationship, internal dynamics alone provides an insufficient explanation of cultural and social shifts. My argument therefore emphasizes the layered and negotiated nature of changes taking place. To use Katzenstein's phrasing for Japan, Thailand's experience was "distinctive" but not "unique."¹⁵⁹

This approach informs my perspective on the system of cinema in Thailand from the 1950s to the 1970s. Cinema was a critical tool in the construction of a Cold War consensus by both the United States and the Soviet Union from the 1945 through 1990. Since the Cold War threat was often more existential than real, films were part of a necessary campaign to make the conflict imaginable to the masses.¹⁶⁰ The communist party in Thailand was never strong enough to threaten Thailand's structure (whether political, economic, or social). While the war in Vietnam, (and later the spread of that conflict into Cambodia and Laos) concerned the Thai government, such threats reached their apogee in 1975, by which point Thailand had already negotiated a withdrawal of American forces. For the bulk of the American period, the threat was stronger in the mind's eye than in reality. The psychological threat was in large part the result of extended and pervasive psychological operations and propaganda by the Thai and US governments.

A hard line, negative approach characterized American anti-communist propaganda from 1946 to 1953. However, from 1953 through to 1978, the US led the way in pivoting to a softer propaganda line, which sought to portray the positive aspects of capitalist, democratic societies

¹⁵⁹ Katzenstein, "Japan," 3.

¹⁶⁰ Tony Shaw and Denise Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 94.

as exemplified by American life. This pivot coincided with greater American intervention in Thailand, and was combined with idealized depictions of cultural and religious (meaning Buddhist) traditions. Changes in infrastructure networks and cinematic technologies that allowed for movies to be shown at minimal expense to villagers in remote villages expanded the reach of the state into the social lives of citizens. Similar patterns characterized US cultural diplomacy that was a major factor in US geopolitical power in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. United States Information Agency (USIA) and USIS propaganda, including film, radio, and printed materials, positively promoted US interests in Southeast Asia and helped build networks with local actors.¹⁶¹

As the 1960 study noted, film was well suited to depict the positive aspects of capitalist society and development programs. Jack Valenti, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), commented in 1977 that “We dominate world screens not because of armies, bayonets, or nuclear bombs, but because what we are exhibiting on foreign screens is what the people of those countries want to see.”¹⁶² Of course, it also allowed the people to see what the MPAA wanted them to see. Films featuring developing cities or infrastructure projects meant that people could imagine a future where progress would come to them. It also created expectations of what the government would and should achieve.

Indeed, the film units intentionally took a positive tone. They combatted communist influences by portraying the positive features of Thai culture, society, and American-backed development. As such, it had a productive impact on depictions of Thai society and culture. The American Cold War articulation of culture emphasized it as both a “way of life” and as a “range

¹⁶¹ Marc Frey, “Tools of Empire: Persuasion and the United States’s Modernizing Mission in Southeast Asia,” *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 4 (2003): 550.

¹⁶² Quoted in Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire : America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 284.

of productions,” not least of which was film. In this way, cultural programs and products were critical to shaping millions of people’s experiences and perceptions of the conflict.¹⁶³ Likewise, social and cultural products, such as film, shaped how state efforts were communicated to Thai people and defined the stakes of the conflict. Criticisms of economic inequality and social hierarchy, for example, were transformed into attacks on the fabric of Thai society and heritage.

Utilizing the conception of the American Imperium, moreover, situates Thailand within international dynamics, and avoids an over-determination of American-Thai relations. Thailand was not alone in experiencing a deluge of American cultural products. Victoria de Grazia wrote extensively on the global American “Market Empire,” which she described as “the rise of a great imperium with the outlook of a great emporium” in the second half of the twentieth century. In Europe, de Grazia argued that American-introduced mass consumption:

...did far more than step into the gaps created by the failed diplomacy, military overreach, and travailed liberalism of the European great powers, failures that are well known. It also established an alternative to the foundering effort of European societies, both to satisfy their own citizens’ mounting demands for a decent level of living and, building on the legacy of earlier revolutionary traditions, to champion such a standard for the larger world.¹⁶⁴

Portrayals of American material prosperity, and the promise of the same, were remarkably effective not only in Thailand, but in diverse settings across the world. However, because the role of the state in Thailand was arguably less developed than in Europe and because the growth of modern commercial markets much more rapid, it provides an important case to examine the role of psychological operations and national identity in Cold War era development, nationalism, and international relations.

However, the visits by USIS mobile information units to Isan villages were also predicated on dynamics of central-periphery social and political relationships in Thailand that

¹⁶³ Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 5.

had evolved since the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁵ Siamese civilizational discourse was established through a sort of proto-ethnography conducted through nineteenth royal travel throughout the Siamese kingdom, especially by King Chulalongkorn.¹⁶⁶ The travelogues and stories published after these journeys produced an “ethno-spatial discourse” of the Thai elite that regulated the social, political, and special hierarchy of Thailand from the lowest *chao pa* (wild forest people) to *chao bannok* (villagers/peasants) to *chao krung* (city people) to *farang* (Westerners).

Thongchai defined *chao bannok*, the category with which the mobile teams were most concerned, as “the multi-ethnic villagers under the supremacy of Bangkok.”¹⁶⁷ He argued that the designations placed the urban Bangkok elite in a superior position, but were also part of a “temporalizing practice, locating and juxtaposing peoples, including the elite themselves, in a new linear (progressive, temporal) cosmic order called civilization.”¹⁶⁸ While the *chao pa* were characterized as wild, frozen in time, and incapable of civilization, the *chao bannok* were portrayed as the familiar subjects of the Bangkok elite—civilizable, but also less advanced.¹⁶⁹

The same hierarchy perception was evident in the movement of information during the 1950s-1970s period. The mobile information teams treated villagers as subjects caught in the past. Teams commonly highlighted their reliance on “traditional” lifestyles and the backwardness of their standards of living. They focused on the villagers’ astonishment at modern technologies such as cars and motion pictures. However, the teams also expressed the desire to bring the villagers forward in time to become developed subjects in the modern Thai nation. That desire signaled an important shift in the core-periphery relationship, even as it was tempered by social

¹⁶⁵ Although “Thailand” was called “Siam” up until 1939, and that they two represent distinct historical and geographic bodies, I will use “Thailand” throughout in order to maintain clarity.

¹⁶⁶ Thongchai Winichakul, “The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910,” in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 42.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 41.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 41.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 48-50.

and political hierarchies. Indeed, the entire premise of the anti-communist propaganda was that, one day, the villagers would have the same lifestyle as those in Bangkok or, even better, in America. In terms of development and material prosperity, *chao bannok* were, at least in the propaganda, placed on the temporal path not only to *chao krung*, but also to *farang*.

However, as the opening to *Cold Fire* indicates, the villagers also held another identity within national frameworks as “northeastern Thais.” The political and cultural position of the peoples living in “northeastern Thailand,” or the locally favored term Isan, has long been contested. In terms of population, 1960s Isan accounted for nine million of Thailand’s approximately 26.3 million citizens, making it the most populous region in the nation. Geographically, the region is defined by the Khorat Plateau and drainage into the Mekhong River. The river also forms the region’s (and Thailand’s) modern (after the 1893 and 1904 treaties with France) boundary with Laos.¹⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the Phetchabun, Dong Phraya Yen, and Sankamphaeng mountain ranges separate Isan from the central plains.

The division of the Khorat Plateau area along the river, rather than based on ethnic or cultural grounds, resulted in the modern period in tensions between Lao and Thai identities for the people in Isan. Previous to the 1894 and 1904 divisions, these people were often called Lao, whether by Siamese, French, or by those living in the region. Indeed, the population was in large part there due to the deportation of the Vientiane population from Vientiane to the Khorat Plateau (as well as part of the central plains) following Chao Anu’s rebellion against Bangkok in the 1820s. The people shared more cultural practices in common with people in modern Laos,

¹⁷⁰ While the Mekhong River defines the modern boundary, as Charles Keyes pointed out, “The whole plateau is drained by the Mekhong and its tributaries, most notably the Mun and Chi Rivers, which flow towards the Mekhong. The geographical attraction towards the Mekhong is shared by the lowland areas of Laos. Consequently, the Khorat Plateau and the Mekhong Valley and tributary valleys of Laos form a natural geographical area, an area which is unified rather than divided by the Mekhong. The Annamite cordillera forms the eastern boundary of this area, running down the center of middle and southern Laos.” Charles F. Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1967), 1.

and spoke Lao (rather than central Thai). In the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, the Isan region came under greater Siamese administrative control, especially with the formation of a national civil service and other reforms by King Chulalongkorn in the last years of his reign before his death in 1910. However, the region remained mostly autonomous and with few attempts by Bangkok to exert Siamese cultural models. Even the nationalization of the bureaucracy was only completed after the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy.¹⁷¹

Political centralization was only possible because of modern transportation and communication technologies, especially with the construction of railways between Isan and Bangkok that were completed in the 1920s and 1930s. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, it took the Ministry of the Interior twelve days to send messages between Bangkok and Nongkhai.¹⁷² The changes to speed of travel and communication between Isan and Bangkok were critical to political reforms. The role of technological innovation in the changing relationship between Bangkok and Isan was similar to that found in the expansion of European empires.

Educational reforms also profoundly influenced Isan social and cultural life. Primary education was made compulsory throughout the nation with the Primary Education Act of 1921. Key effects of this reform were the replacement of monks with secular teachers, the expansion of educational opportunities for women, and the establishment of schools in even the most remote areas of the country. Isan schoolchildren learned national geography, central Thai language, and nationalist historical narratives. Moreover, because the national pillars of religion-nation-monarchy were taught in schools, the new curriculum was instrumental in building respect for the Thai king. By the 1960s, reports from the MITs and USIS reports evidence that these reforms, from the establishment of secular educators as authority figures and nationalized

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷² Ibid, 18.

curriculum teaching loyalty to central Thai values and the Thai king, were successfully imbedded in Isan village life.

However, there were contradictions in the process of nationalization. Keyes pointed out that,

The educational reforms, like the administrative reforms and the expansion of communication and transportation networks, served to bring Northeasterners into much closer contact with Central Thai culture and society and to make the Northeasterners aware that their future would be affected by the decisions in Bangkok. At the same time, these innovations also began to make Northeasterners realize that their local culture and patterns of living were considered inferior to those of Central Thai.¹⁷³

Thus, from the 1920-30s onwards, it is possible to trace the modern arc of both national and regional identity formation in Isan. From the 1950s, those tensions were made more complicated by the extensive presence of American troops, civil servants, and intelligence officers, amongst others, who were part of an emergent international “Thai” identity. Therefore, while efforts at building a national identity were significant, their impact cannot be assumed. Rather, the process of understanding their identity as Thais likely also made people in Isan reflect upon their position in the national hierarchy and their local identities.

There were also wider forces at play. USIS began operations in Thailand beginning in 1949, and by 1950 joint US-Thai propaganda had increased exponentially. The strengthening of US-Thai relations was part of US Cold War efforts to fight the spread of communism globally. With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the US felt the need for allies in Asia to bolster its legitimacy in the region. It also provided an opportunity for Phibun, who sought closer ties with the US, to demonstrate the Thai commitment to anti-communism. Historian Daniel Fineman argued that Phibun had personal reasons for pursuing the US alliance, explaining,

Phibun aligned himself with the United States more to solidify his shaky position with the military junta than out of a desire to protect the country from communist China. By

¹⁷³ Ibid, 20.

siding with the United States, Phibun won for the military large commitments of weapons aid, and earned for himself the invaluable position as foreign aid rainmaker for the army.¹⁷⁴

The Thai-US alliance was solidified through key moves by Phibun's government, namely recognition of the Bao Dai government in Vietnam and the commitment of Thai troops in Korea. The US gained legitimacy and, eventually, a staging ground for troops and equipment. Phibun's government's decisions made Thailand one of the US' closest allies in Asia and simultaneously solidified the position of the military in Thai politics.¹⁷⁵

The alliance paved the way for increased anti-communist propaganda and psychological operations. Intended to bolster support for Phibun's government, the US alliance, and an anti-communist agenda, the government produced news articles, pamphlets, posters, radio broadcasts, and films. Richard McCarthy, a USIS Public Affairs Officer recalled that by the late 1950s they "had managed to cover most of Thailand with two inches of paper."¹⁷⁶ One 1952 film titled *Report from Korea*, for example, was particularly successful. Voiced over in Thai, the film was tailor-made for Thai audiences. USIS surveyors noted the success of the film with pleasure, observing that,

USIS is fortunate in the preference of Thai audiences for films dealing with warfare in all its aspects. This preference can be utilized filmwise to further a number of attitudes which USIS is attempting to encourage, i.e., that the United States and the non-Communist world are strong; that the Communist threat is immediate; that the United States has been effectively and energetically fighting Communism in Korea; that the "Free World" is ready to protect Thailand militarily.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 275. Those two decisions resulted in a "windfall" of aid to Thailand, including an immediate \$10 million directly from the US, \$25 million from the World Bank, and substantial arms shipments

¹⁷⁵ Daniel Fineman, "Phibun, the Cold War and Thailand's Foreign Policy Revolution of 1950," in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Stanford University Press, 2009), 276.

¹⁷⁶ Richard M. McCarthy, Jack O'Brien Interview, 1988, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

¹⁷⁷ The Society for Applied Anthropology, "Evaluation of USIS-Thailand Motion Picture Activities (Draft of Report)" (United States International Information Administration, Department of State, December 23, 1952), 69.

In one of the follow-up interviews, a teacher from Lopburi reported that villagers enjoyed Korean War news because many residents had relatives serving there.¹⁷⁸ Considering that the US presence in Asia would be characterized by military engagements for some time, Thai preference for war films was fortuitous indeed. The success of war films also benefited Phibun's personal popularity and political clout. Because through press meetings and public announcements Phibun had been personally linked to the involvement of Thai soldiers in the conflict, he gained substantially from propaganda efforts.

The joint cooperation of the United States and Thai governments created an ideal laboratory for Cold War propaganda and psychological warfare. Since Thailand had never been formally colonized, the United States was able to work directly with military and royal elite without needing to consider the aims of a former European power.¹⁷⁹ This also meant that Thailand's elites were able to assert their own interests to a large degree. A major 1952 USIA study concluded that, "It is axiomatic that an information program in Thailand must work through official government channels. Such a program must not conflict with Thai government policies or with the vested interests of key officials if it is to be successful."¹⁸⁰ These same groups, namely "well educated, Westernized Thai (military officers, civil servants, businessmen, teachers, etc.)" as well as Buddhist monks represented the target groups for USIS propaganda in the early 1950s.¹⁸¹ Psychological warfare and propaganda were ostensibly aimed at fighting communist influence. In practice they promoted Thai national identity in the countryside.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 67.

¹⁷⁹ Benedict Anderson explored some of the implications of Thailand's never-been-colonized status . Anderson, "Thai Studies."

¹⁸⁰ The Society for Applied Anthropology, "USIS-Thailand Motion Picture Activities," 43. In December 1952, the US Department of State's United States International Information Administration (USIIA) contracted The Society for Applied Anthropology to study the distribution and reception of USIS motion picture propaganda in Thailand. USIIA was the predecessor of the United States Information Agency (USIA) that operated from 1945-1953. USIS was the international name for the USIA.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 40-42.

The 1952 study, for example, recommended highlighting “widely shared and least controversial” cultural “ideologies,” including national supremacy and sovereignty, reverence for the king, the dangers of communism, the need for development and innovation, and the importance of international respect, especially from the UN and US.¹⁸² This list evidences the use of propaganda to establish a hegemonic national identity, in addition to anti-communist sentiment. With the exception of Buddhism, the list characterizes the core elements of the “Thai” national identity as advocated by the successive military regimes, hand in hand with the United States.

On May 9th, 1950 the first mobile health and education units traveled around the northeastern provinces, equipped with motion picture projection equipment and USIS films.¹⁸³ The various elements that joint US-Thai propaganda would identify as quintessentially Thai and the technology needed to promote those elements had come together. The earliest trips to show films in distant villages were rough business. As Robert Anderson, a Vice Consul in Chiang Mai in 1951, explained, “I was my own USIS officer. My wife and I went out into the jungles with a projector.... We showed movies to people out in the countryside.”¹⁸⁴ As with other USIS projects, the film program in its early incarnation targeted “special audiences” for psychological operations, especially educated and Westernized Thai, military officers, civil servants, businessmen, teachers, and Buddhist monks.¹⁸⁵

As the amount of intelligence derived from these programs grew in quantity, the US quickly realized it needed a program to collect and analyze the data.¹⁸⁶ In the mid-1950s,

¹⁸² Ibid, 77.

¹⁸³ Grossman, *Chronicle of Thailand*.

¹⁸⁴ Horace Torbert Interview, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Oral History Interviews, “Robert Anderson,” 1990.

¹⁸⁵ The Society for Applied Anthropology, “USIS-Thailand Motion Picture Activities.” 42.

¹⁸⁶ US National Archives at College Park, “Letter from John Pickering to Henry Loomis,” December 23, 1955.

therefore, the US State Department and USIS worked with the Thai government to develop a public opinion survey program. No effort of that kind had previously been attempted in Thailand. The early surveys focused on Thai mass media preferences, especially on how audiences consumed information and where they received their news. The first survey focused on educated elite audiences and their reactions to USIS media programs. More surveys were subsequently developed for key target groups, such as the 1958 survey of university student attitudes and media habits and a 1959 study of university student attitudes towards American mass media and commercial films.¹⁸⁷

The studies of mass media effectiveness consistently found that motion pictures were the most effective medium amongst most target audiences.¹⁸⁸ The study further estimated that for every ten Thais reading newspapers, at least one hundred were watching films.¹⁸⁹ Film was also understood to be useful in communicating so-called difficult material to the common Thai. For example, USIA officials were concerned over how to communicate the term “disarmament,” since it was, in their estimates, “only crudely conceptualized by largely uneducated rural elements.”¹⁹⁰ To address this segment, an official suggested that instead of the USIA putting on a “run-of-mill exhibit,” a “firsthand view [of] modern armaments and description[s] [of] their total destructive power” would be more appropriate. Furthermore, the official suggested the use of “colorful, mobile, imaginative material, particularly film.”¹⁹¹

The subjects of these early studies reflect the fact that through the 1950s both the Thai and US governments were primarily concerned with the activities and attitudes of a narrow slice

¹⁸⁷ US National Archives at College Park, “A Study of University Student Attitudes in (Bangkok) Thailand,” April 7, 1958; “*Exposure of Thai University Students to Mass Media and Information service Activities*,” August 1959.

¹⁸⁸ Special Operations Research Office, “Psychological Operations,” 73. Not all audiences were asked about motion pictures, resulting in incomplete data. However, for all of the audiences asked about film, it was ranked as the most effective.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 80.

¹⁹⁰ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, Country Project Correspondence, 1952-1963.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

of Thai society, namely urbanized, educated Thais from elite, military, or religious backgrounds. After the 1951 “Silent Coup” (or “Radio Coup”), the military’s political dominance of Thai politics was solidified. Phibun was forced to accept the coup, and continued to act as Prime Minister, although his grasp on power was highly tenuous. With the elimination of the Senate, power was consolidated around the Bangkok military elite. There was little incentive for the US to focus their efforts on mass audiences, considering how little formal power they had. As a 1960 study of psychological warfare in Thailand bluntly put it, “the focus was upon those special audiences most likely to be able to contribute to the accomplishments of U.S. aims and objectives in the event of war.”¹⁹²

Overall, efforts in the 1950s were fitful. They often depended on the consensus in Washington or who the US ambassador to Thailand was. The main restriction, however, was the chilling of US-Thai relations that lasted from 1955 to 1957. This was partially due to Phibun’s general suspicion of the dangers of “public opinion.” One USIS official, writing in 1958, claimed “the former [Phibun] government cast a jaundiced eye on any suggestion of surfacing public opinion, measuring, describing, and interpreting it. Of course, it would have been interested in the results of a survey, but there was trepidation lest the survey instrument might open a spigot that could not be turned off.”¹⁹³ That observation highlights Phibun’s tenuous grasp on power by the mid-1950s, which also impacted on his attitude towards the United States. Fearful that US support was facilitating his rival Phao, Phibun began developing links with communist China and the Soviet Union. This included allowing films to be imported from communist countries. The US expressed its concern about this unexpected shift, with Walter Robertson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Eastern Affairs, in 1957 asking the Thai ambassador to the US, Pote

¹⁹² Special Operations Research Office, “Psychological Operations.”

¹⁹³ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, Country Project Correspondence, 1952-1963.

Sarasin “why the Thai government has permitted the exhibition of Communist pictures, especially those from Communist China.”¹⁹⁴

But ultimately the US need not have been concerned about Phibun’s policy, as by the end of the year he was overthrown in a coup by Sarit Thanarat. The US was initially pessimistic about the potential for a relationship with Sarit. His relationship with the USIS likewise got off to a bad start, apparently due to rumors that the USIS was conducting a smear campaign against him.¹⁹⁵ For a time, this caused real problems for USIS operations. A 1959 USIS report detailed the difficulties of relations with Sarit:

One of the single most significant changes in this past year has been USIS improved cooperation with the Thai Government. The Prime Minister’s suspicion of USIS... was not to be taken lightly. The Prime Minister went so far as to air his views to the Ambassador and made the cryptic remark that USIS in other countries had stirred up trouble and suffered mob violence as a result. That he was fully competent of taking action in such matters was evidenced when he expelled two Soviet information officials toward the end of the year for alleged unfriendly activity. Other factors contributed toward the situation and USIS found itself unpopular in certain important mass media and educational quarters. Since the former are operated directly by or influence specifically by government officials in most cases, and as education is almost entirely a government province, USIS unpopularity with the government could hamstring the entire program. As it was, USIS was attacked by a number of papers, radio and TV stations cancelled existing USIS programs and refused to consider new ones, university cooperation was curtailed, a Fulbright professor was accused of internal political interference, and Thammasart and Chulalongkorn students contemplated an anti-USIS demonstration—it was aborted only because the Mission received prior warning. As a result, strong efforts were directed toward establishing governmental confidence.¹⁹⁶

Indeed, the USIS went on a campaign to repair relations, starting with Sarit. They were ultimately successful (although it is unclear what steps were taken), as the report observed that “Prime Minister Sarit has borrowed and screened substantially all the films in the USIS film library and expressed appreciation of the edification received.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 181.

¹⁹⁵ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, Country Project Correspondence, 1952-1963.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

The campaign to repair the images of the USIS also involved building a relationship with the monarchy. To that end, the USIS produced a “live” television show to promote the Ananda Mahidol Foundation, a project of King Bhumibol. According the report, “The King made known his pleasure to many high ranking Thai officials. USIS gained a great deal of prestige from the show, in addition to showing that the most revered man in Thailand chooses to send his own personal scholars to the United States for advanced study.”¹⁹⁸ The careful courting of the king and prime minister reflected that, more than ever before, the USIS’ ability to operate in Thailand was contingent on working with and supporting the initiatives of the country’s leaders and elite.

The period following 1957 would inaugurate new levels of US-Thai cooperation, including expanded psychological warfare programs. In 1959, the Ministry of Defense started the Psychological Warfare School, with a counterpart begun in the same year by the Royal Thai Army. Both units used USIS materials, as well as personnel, who taught on public opinion and propaganda. The USIS also began formally cooperating with the Public Relations Department to work on the production of content for books, presentations, lectures, radio, television, news, and other media. In May 1959, Public Relations also created their own “social survey division” in order to study public opinion.¹⁹⁹ Some of the USIS branches that were closed in the mid-1950s under Phibun, such as the one in Udon Thani, were reopened.²⁰⁰ These types of initiatives would continue with the build-up of US forces in Southeast Asia through the early and mid-1960s. One of the most influential manifestations of the use of film and psychological warfare to promote a broad range of government programs, national identity, and the American agenda was the mobile film unit program.

The expansion of psychological operations in the 1960s, including the mobile films unit

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ “Public Opinion Surveys Aimed,” *Bangkok Post*, May 29, 1959.

²⁰⁰ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, Country Project Correspondence, 1952-1963.

program, coincided with US involvement in Vietnam, including the deployment of thousands of “advisors” under the Kennedy administration. A similar strategy was adopted in Thailand. In 1964, the first US combat troops were secretly stationed in Thailand, in part responding to the beginnings of civil war in Laos. Thailand became a major base for US air operations, with the US presence increasing exponentially after 1964. The US built airfields, from which three-quarters of the bomb tonnage dropped on North Vietnam and Laos was flown. They also expanded military-related infrastructure generally, including deep-water ports and an intelligence and communications system.²⁰¹ With the build-up, US military personnel became a significant presence in the country. Moreover, because bases were largely placed in the northeast, troops were most commonly stationed there and in Bangkok.

As military bases increased, the US presence also expanded in other respects. Although US-led film teams travelled in Thailand since at least 1950, the Mobile Information Team Program officially began operations in 1962.²⁰² Although the USIS formally ran the program, team members were mostly Thais. Only one American USIS officer was ever present due to the desire to present a “Thai” face. As one team report noted, “if the objectives of the Mobile Information Team Program and all aspects of follow-up are to be successful, it must remain a Thai operation with U.S. participation consistently subsidiary.”²⁰³ The primary purpose of the early units was to distribute various forms of propaganda via film showings, pamphlets, and pictures of King Bhumibol and the Buddha.

Most of these materials were created in line with the soft propaganda approach. They tended to depict positive aspects of Thai society and American aid, rather than negative

²⁰¹ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker, *Economy and Politics*, 294-295.

²⁰² US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I: First Trip to Remote Areas in Amphur That Phanom and Amphur Khemma-Raj,” 1962, 1.

²⁰³ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “The Fourteenth Mobile Information Team Trip” 1963, 1.

condemnations of communism, although that was used as well. Handing out pictures of the king, which people could then display on their walls, was meant to inspire national belonging and pride. As Robert Lasher, the USIS officer who traveled with the teams, reported, the team's "further purpose is to create a stronger feeling of village identification with Thailand and a quickened sense of loyalty towards the Thai Government."²⁰⁴ Anti-communism and Thai nationalism went hand-in-hand.

The teams traveled to far-flung villages not often visited by central government representatives. Their travel was enabled by the expanding infrastructure of roads and communication networks in Thailand. US funding to support the construction of roads, such as the Mittraphap Highway, were explained in terms of American support for Thailand's development and the need to progress the economic livelihoods of rural Thais. In fact, most of these roads were built for strategic and military purposes, such as connecting bases more conveniently to Bangkok.²⁰⁵ Bangkok formed the core of the network, with both roads and trains connecting provincial cities to Bangkok more readily than neighboring provinces. Bangkok thus became an intermediary between the world and the rest of the country. The roads also facilitated the flow of information across the country.

Lasher described a "typical" day in the field and the early operations of the teams:

Enroute to a village for the night the Team stopped at villages along the way to talk with the people, distribute pictures of the King, (one to a family) eat khao neo (glutinous rice) and drink coconut milk when offered and – if the village was not too far away – tell the people about the movie showing that night. The Team usually arrived at its "night stand" about 4 pm, was greeted by the village headman, teachers and many of the farmers who showed us where we were to stay for the night. In every case the Team arrival was anticipated and we were put up either at the local school or in open-sided salawat [pavilion] at the temple, which also was the village school. After a bath in grass thatch shelters or in the Mekong River, the Team brought out bottles of Mekong [whiskey],

²⁰⁴ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, "Mobile Information Team I," 1.

²⁰⁵ R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985* / (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), 22.

offering drinks to the headman, school teachers and farmers who had come to see us. Dinner – either cooked ourselves or prepared for us by the villagers was eaten about 6:30. If there was time between arrival and dinner the Team toured the village talking with people and telling them about the evening film show.

The film screen was set up in the open area next to the school or sala wat.... The show usually began about 7:00 PM with a talk in the Northeast dialect by Mr. Charoen Pantong who explained why we were there and introduced, one by one, each member of the Team. In several places other members of the Team, including this reporting officer, made brief speeches.... Between each film one of the team members, often Mr. Visit Bonnilpa, Nai Amphur of Khemma-raj who speaks fluent Northeast Thai, would give explanations about the films. The film show usually ended about midnight with team members going to bed soon thereafter. Pictures of the King were given out during these brief intermissions....

Often before the team left, villagers would gather at the school or sala wat for a farewell blessing, called a bai-see, in which strings were tied around the wrists of each Team member accompanied by chanted blessings, thanks and wishes for a safe journey and for the Team member's well-being.... Team visits usually ended with the offering by members of the Team of tea, cigarettes, tinned milk or other things to the chief abbot of the local wat.

As Lasher described, the team made consistent efforts to integrate themselves into the local communities. The team attempted to behave in accordance with local practices, recognize local hierarchies (especially the school and the wat), and include regional politicians and officers who spoke the local dialect. They also behaved as good guests by avoiding taking people's food and handing out gifts at the end of their stay. Just as the USIS was aware of the need to focus on "widely accepted" values and to work with national leaders, they also recognized the importance of village hierarchies to their local reception.

The footprint of the mobile teams was extensive. The first team trip alone visited forty villages and, according to the team report, met some 20,000 people. Approximately 9,000 people attended the film showings, which were shown for about four hours every night. The teams were civilian led, although they sometimes included members of the police and Border Patrol Police. The exception was the sixth mobile information team trip, which was a pilot trip for the Royal Thai Army's (RTA) own mobile information team. It was comprised exclusively of RTA officers

and non-commissioned officers, as well as one American USIS officer. The civilian teams typically included two government bureaucrats (from the Ministry of the Interior and Public Relations Department), two chief district officers (*nai amphoe*) from the Northeast, two USIS officers (one Thai and one American), a film projectionist, and a driver.²⁰⁶

The teams distributed printed materials to schools, local officials, and religious leaders, including maps of Thailand and Southeast Asia, pictures of the Buddha, travel posters, radio schedules, and other materials on government agricultural and community development programs.²⁰⁷ They targeted villages primarily for their poverty and extreme isolation, as well as their proximity to communist-infiltrated zones. Many of these villages were so isolated, the team leader claimed, that “many people in the villages... had never heard of the King, the Prime Minister or, in fact, the Government of Thailand.”²⁰⁸ By the seventh team trip in December 1962 at least, the teams were handing out pictures of Prime Minister Sarit as well.

The importance placed on distributing visual materials, including photographs, spoke to the visual nature of the teams' propaganda. As the team leader indicated in his assessment of the villages' remoteness, the ability to recognize the face of the king or prime minister was an importance signal of an individual's integration into the nation-state. On the first trip, the team distributed 2,000 pictures of the king to each house in the village. Today, images of the king's portrait hanging prominently in Thai homes are widely noted as emblematic of national

²⁰⁶ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I,” introduction.

²⁰⁷ The materials, in total, included: 2,000 pictures of the King; 96 road maps of Thailand; 20 maps of Southeast Asia; 100 pictures of the Buddha; 20 Thai travel posters; 7 “primary education reading study flip charts;” 200 scratch pads; booklets including 60 on poultry raising, 60 on the work of the kamnan, and 50 on 4-H clubs; 1,700 pamphlets on community development; 20 pamphlets on the Public Relations Department School; 50 radio schedules; and “miscellaneous [news sheets] and pamphlets on various subjects” (Mobile Team I, Addenda). Not all of these materials for intended for the general public, but some were also intended for schools, teachers, government officials, and monks.

²⁰⁸ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I,” addenda.

reverence and love for the monarch. The USIS contributed to that habit.²⁰⁹ Indeed, the team noted that the pictures of the king were hung on all the walls of village homes immediately after their distribution.²¹⁰ The RTA team trip in Northern Thailand reported that “the pictures of the Phitsanuloke Buddha and of the King were very gratefully received. In most places the people had no pictures in their houses of either.”²¹¹ Lasher observed the usefulness of distributing the portraits, recalling that “Team Captain Charoen made a point of visiting houses where the people were reported to be under Communist influence, talked to the families and left pictures of the King.”²¹² With the king looking down upon the inhabitants of a home, it seemed, they would all be reminded that to be communist was to be un-Thai. The observation highlights again that fact that national reverence for King Bhumibol and the association between him and development did not occur wholly organically. Instead, it was at least partially the result of concerted efforts by the Thai and US governments.

The pictures of the king and the Phitsanuloke Buddha, moreover, were visual reminders of the national hierarchy in which the villagers were situated. Likewise, while the teams sought to integrate themselves into the village, it was not in an egalitarian sense. Instead, they integrated themselves into, and in fact legitimized, hierarchical structures. They typically stayed on the grounds of the village temple or school. They selected notable village leaders, monks, and teachers to discuss village needs. These individuals were critical mediators of the operations’ success, especially since they were able to speak both central Thai and the regional dialect. On the team’s trip to Surin province near the Cambodian border, the absence of teachers was

²⁰⁹ USIS was by no means the only source of these photographs. The 1955 Thai Government Psychological Indoctrination Program also handed out photographs of the King.

²¹⁰ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I,” 4.

²¹¹ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team Pilot Trip,” no page numbers.

²¹² US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I,” 7.

strongly felt and blamed for communications problems.²¹³ While working with village notables was practical, it also placed those people in the position of mediation between the village and the state. By assuming that certain people held “traditional” positions of respect in villages, the team’s members ensured that they would hold power in future interactions. Indeed, that was in part the intention of the USIS and Thai governments. Discussing radio ownership, Lasher reported that, “While radio ownership in remote villages will not be widespread for many years to come, it is the people who count for the most who now have them- schoolteachers, abbots, village headmen or merchants.”²¹⁴

The teams also regularly met with provincial and local leaders. On the pilot trip for the Royal Thai Army mobile information team, for example, the team met with the Governor of Nan province, district officials, police chiefs, military commanders, village headmen, and school headmasters.²¹⁵ In some cases, regional and local political leaders took part in the trip and made speeches during the film program. The Governor of Surin accompanied the seventh team trip.²¹⁶ The team captain for the first few trips to the Northeast, Charoen Panthong, became the Governor of Nongkhai. In so doing, the teams crawled across the web of provincial politics and power hierarchies.

Likewise, the teams reinforced gender hierarchies in village power structures and capital-village interactions. Every team member on all of the trips was male. The teams generally interacted with male leadership, as most Thai politicians and all religious leaders were men. Perhaps the only occasion for discussion with women in positions of power was with the few female teachers. Regarding village healthcare, the team’s male doctor made all the

²¹³ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team: Seventh Field Trip,” 1962, 6.

²¹⁴ US National Archives at College Park, “Report: Mobile Information Team I: Third Trip,” 1962, no page numbers.

²¹⁵ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team Pilot Trip,” no page numbers.

²¹⁶ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, Mobile Information Team: Seventh Field Trip,” 1.

recommendations, despite mentions of the presence of village midwives. Village needs, ranging from health services, infrastructure, communication, and education, were determined amongst a small group of men. The dominance of men in decision-making positions contrasted with the visibility of women in the identification of national issues. From 1970 onwards, for example, family planning was an integral part of development efforts. Narratives of Thailand's ambiguous relationship with development and modernization usually focus on women as wives, lovers, and prostitutes. Thus, the creation of gender demarcated spaces of power in which those issues were discussed (from the school to the *wat* to government offices) set an important precedent. Women became vessels in which the hopes and anxieties of national development were placed.

Although the teams' understanding of the national power hierarchy was clearly defined, the reports also evidenced ambiguities in villagers' ethnic, national, and regional origins and loyalties. In Nongkhai, near the Lao border and quite close to the Lao capital of Vientiane, the teams noted that communists crossed the border in order to convince people that they were really Lao and not Thai. It was certainly the aim of the teams to convince villagers otherwise. The villagers likely adopted a more flexible understanding of national and ethnic affiliations, if they did so at all. National identification was also prominent in the few descriptions of Vietnamese residents. In general, the team reported that Vietnamese kept their distance from the operations. One story of Vietnamese graves encountered by Lasher, in which he pondered why the graves were dug so far from any village, revealed deep suspicion of any Vietnamese encountered by the team members. Regional distinctions were also noted between Northerners and Northeasterners. Reports frequently repeated the claim that Northeasterners were more friendly and open. Several instances of reluctance by villagers to engage with the team were observed. Each time, however, they were attributed to communist subversion, rather than a lack of interest in the team's

activities. Unresponsiveness, especially by villagers in the Northeast, was portrayed as subversive.

Suspicion of communist influence was not out of place, given that villages were often proximate to areas of Pathet Lao activity. Teams commonly reported hearing news and stories of Pathet Lao operations, including distribution of aid. In one case, the team heard that the Pathet Lao “had come by helicopter to distribute money, medicines and promises.”²¹⁷ Villages along the Mekong River were noticeable for the “lack of young men.”²¹⁸ Meanwhile, Lasher expressed concerns that the display of higher living standards outside the villages, especially as evidenced during film shows, would cause dissatisfaction.²¹⁹ He further stated that “the effectiveness of the initial team visit will be entirely dissipated and the people considerably disillusioned if at least some sort of minimal assistance is not forthcoming within the next few months.”²²⁰ In fact, as the trips continued, they repeatedly recommended aid from the provincial and central governments. As regional politicians became more involved in team trips, they also contributed to the rising importance of aid projects to the teams’ operations.

The earliest efforts to include aid focused on public health services. The second team trip, for example, included a doctor from the Department of Health, who carried with him medicines and vaccines. On that trip, over four thousand people were vaccinated.²²¹ Later, the health program was expanded to allow for recommendations on follow-up support. In one village, the team doctor recommended that the government provide money for additional midwives.²²²

Initially, aid was only given to improve the effectiveness of government propaganda and in

²¹⁷ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I,” 7.

²¹⁸ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Report: Mobile Information Team I: Second Trip,” 1962, no page numbers.

²¹⁹ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I,” 5.

²²⁰ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Mobile Information Team I,” no page numbers.

²²¹ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Second Trip,” no page numbers.

²²² US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Report: The Eighth Mobile Information Team Field Trip,” 1963, 17.

reaction to communist competition. Indeed, one of the early recommendations by the team was that if the case should arise that aid be proposed for an area, a mobile information team should first be given the opportunity to visit the area to clearly link aid with mobile information team activities.²²³ Aid-giving and actual development were not goals by themselves.

Recognition of the importance of aid to the villagers was partly led by a growing concern that communist groups appealed to a very real need by villagers and an understanding among villagers that Bangkok received most of the benefits of Thailand's rapid development. In one report on a 1962 trip with a team led by the Royal Thai Army, Lasher recalled an encounter with a beggar:

This [USIS] writer offered 50 [satang] (2 ½ cents) to a one-armed panhandler in [Uttaradit]. The beggar took one scornful look at the coin and walked off saying, 'I can get more than that from the Communists.' This left the writer with rather mixed feelings. Was he stingy? Had he lost a (somewhat drunken) soul to the Communists? Was a cold war skirmish lost on the hot streets of Uttaradit?²²⁴

Although the aside was clearly meant to be humorous, it seems that Lasher and members of the team recognized the need to offer more than information and consultation.

The World Bank expressed the same view in its 1970 in-house report on the Thai economy and society:

... the majority of rain-fed subsistence rice farmers in the north and northeast, and to a lesser extent in the south, have been left out of the economic boom of the 1960s. Their real (inflation-adjusted) incomes either stagnated or declined in the past 15 years. One-third of agricultural households – 9 million people – are living in absolute poverty, and many millions more are barely above that line, while the other income groups have grown very rich... [I]t is certainly not a coincidence that insurgent activities are most frequent in those areas of the country where the bulk of the population has not benefited from the growth process.²²⁵

Thailand's "modernization without development" was due to numerous factors, not least of

²²³ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, "Second Trip," no page numbers.

²²⁴ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, Reference, trip 2/RTA

²²⁵ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, "Political Economy," 153.

which was corruption.²²⁶ After the construction of the Mittraphap Highway, for example, all the lands alongside the highway were given to military leaders.²²⁷ I argue that it was also due to the primacy of achieving loyalty in village projects. Developmental discourse was part of the model, but actual development was secondary. The implementation of projects and aid, however, became perceived as a necessary component in achieving loyalty. It also created a new dynamic in relations between the state and civil society, as the expectations of what the state would do in return for ideological loyalty rose.

The films chosen for the programs likewise reflected the primacy of developing loyalty and promoting national identity. Lasher explained that “the films, all borrowed from USIS, were chosen for the educational value (about activities of the Thai government, community development, etc.), and for their usefulness in promoting loyalty to King and country.”²²⁸ Film titles included *Thai State Railways*, *Day in the Life of a Nai Amphur*, *Army of Thailand*, *Thai Border Patrol Police*, *The Royal Tour of the Northeast*, and *The Sentimental Journey* (which I discussed in chapter two). As time wore on, films were included on agricultural and irrigation projects in the Northeast, Buddhist customs, SEATO-funded development projects, *mohlam* folk music, road construction, and other regional development projects. These films generally fell into seven main subject categories, namely culture, development, military, monarchy, government, police, and education. Excepting the category of government (which included many of the films focused on development projects, royal activities, etc.), films on development and the military were the most numerous, followed by those on culture, the monarchy, and the government respectively.

²²⁶ Norman Jacobs, *Modernization without Development: Thailand as an Asian Case Study* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971).

²²⁷ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker, *Economy and Politics*, 298.

²²⁸ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “The Seventeenth Mobile Information Team Trip,” 1964, 4.

The films communicated knowledge not only through visual references, but also through narration and soundtracks in local dialects. While early trips relied on team members to provide narration in local dialects, by the fourteenth team trip in November 1963, many of the films had the soundtrack entirely in Northeastern dialect.²²⁹ Team members, many of whom came from the provinces visited, felt strongly that inclusion of non-central dialects was critical to the success of the teams' message.

While the language was sometimes regional, the content of the films provided visual representation of what was “happening” in the Thai nation. They provided powerful images, especially if villagers had often never seen a film before. On a visit to remote villages in Nakhon Phanom province in January 1963, the team reported that:

There was nothing equivocal about the village reaction to the USIS movies shown (several of which had Northeast dialect soundtracks, the rest in Central Thai). In most villages movies had never before been seen, and the people were excitedly enthusiastic. One woman, however, reported fleeing in terror as the railroad rushed towards her on the screen. Another woman said the movies were so beautiful she wished they could have gone all night.²³⁰

The films were intended to enable the villagers to visualize national progress and achievement. They provided visual representation of projects and people across the nation, thereby creating a cohesive narrative for a nation working together.

The mobile information programs reinforced social and political hierarchies, but they also created social opportunities by opening up public spaces through film screenings. This was a particularly significant development for women and their access to public information. Women were, in general, less likely than men to receive extended education. The numbers of literate women were rising in both the elite and middle classes in Bangkok, but opportunities were still

²²⁹ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Fourteenth Mobile Information Team Trip,” 4.

²³⁰ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Report: The Sixteenth Mobile Information Team Field Trip: Visits to 11 Villages in Nakorn Phanom Province,” 1964, 11.

limited for women of the lower classes and outside of Bangkok. Women's lower rates of literacy meant, for example, that they were less able to engage with discourses of community and identity in literature. Even as literacy rates rose substantially through the 1960s, women were still more likely to be illiterate than men. The table below shows the change in literacy rates between 1960 and 1970. In all likelihood, the literacy rates in many of the villages visited by the teams would have had lower rates than those at the national level. Newspapers also presented barriers for the semi-literate and illiterate. However, they were also more accessible than the literature of high culture. They also tended to be read in public settings, where people might read them aloud for others to hear.²³¹

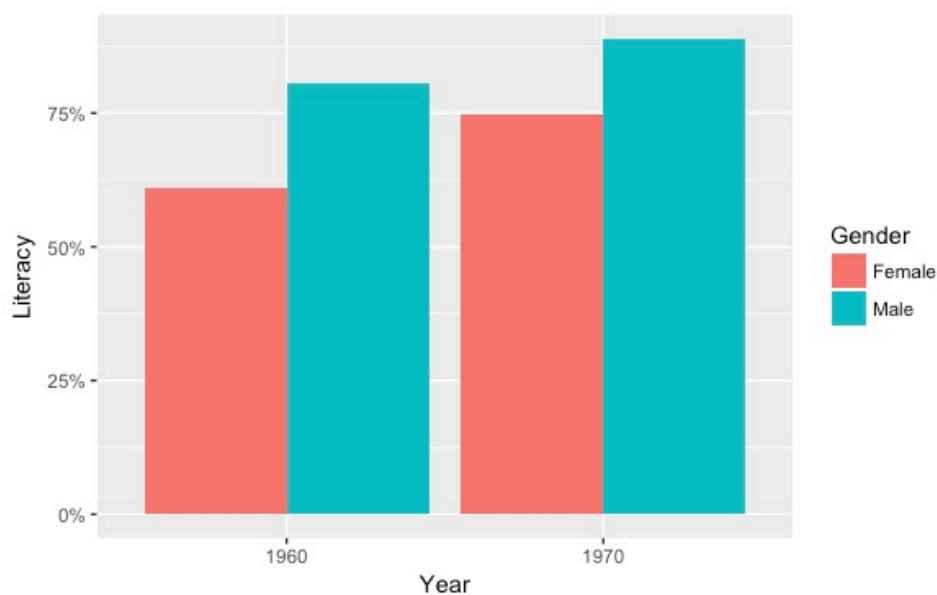


Figure 2.1 Literacy of Population Aged 10 Years and Over by Sex, 1960 and 1970²³²

However, film and its use of images to convey the storyline was a medium that did not require a literate audience. Knowing how to read a film is, of course, a learned art in and of itself. However, access to the spectacle and affective impact is more immediate. As Barmé argued, as early as the 1920s cinema became one of the first public spaces in which both men

²³¹ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 98.

²³² United Nations, *Population of Thailand* (Bangkok: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations, 1976), 132.

and women interacted on a mass scale.²³³ While the educated elite in Thailand (as well as the middle-class beginning in the early 1900s) had long read foreign newspapers or novels, film also brought access to foreign media to a larger section of the population. Annette Hamilton observed that, “Access to film provided for the relatively less educated, and for most women, their primary access to fictional narratives on the western model.”²³⁴ For women, then, film offered an entirely new perspective and social reference point. The potential of cinematic knowledge was highly gendered.

This was true not just in Thailand, but also in Europe. There, women adopted and adapted the behavior norms, fashion, and trends in Hollywood films. The increasing visibility of women in public places like the cinema demanded renewed attention to women’s behavior and fashion.

De Grazia described the influence of American films:

Mainly working-class women... indicated how significant American movies had been for the formation of what might be described as a “new-woman” peer culture. More than just a distraction, the cinema was a place where women could go unescorted, often with female family members or friends; movies were a major subject of discussion and memory, influencing mannerisms and fashion. As such, the cinema afforded a kind of imaginary space; this, *pace* mass cultural theorists, offered possibilities of individual development practically impervious to the clumsy discipline of traditional state, community, or familial authorities.²³⁵

Portrayals of women in films thus represented an important reference point with a broad reach, regardless of whether the portrayals were accepted, used piecemeal, or rejected outright. Again, this suggests the significance of common knowledge. Spectators viewing women on screen in public spaces were part of a process of creating common knowledge about what it meant to be a modern or traditional woman. Film therefore had the potential to generate solidarity through mutual observance of shared experiences.

²³³ Ibid, 69.

²³⁴ Annette Hamilton, “Family Dramas: Film and Modernity in Thailand,” *Screen* 33, no. 3 (1992): 262.

²³⁵ Victoria de Grazia, “Mass Culture and Sovereignty: The American Challenge to European Cinemas, 1920-1960,” *Journal of Modern History* 61 (March 1989): 86.

Cinemas likewise became important public spaces in which women went out in Bangkok during the 1920s and 1930s. There, they became consumers of modern products and fashion. Modern forms of dress, often inspired by the west, were initially worn only by the upper class. As the rest of urban Bangkok began to attend the cinema and consume entertainment in print media, the middle class became avid consumers of modern fashion and other goods.²³⁶ With that shift, public spaces like cinemas exposed more women not only to foreign models, but also those of different class backgrounds. Understandably, women of the elite class typically received more extensive education and opportunities to travel abroad. However, for middle and lower class women, media offered important opportunities to view alternate cultural and social models.

With the 1960s, cinema also became an important source of news and information. News segments, for example, would precede commercial films at most theaters. Films was situation in the broader spectrum of news sources, such as radio, newspapers, and personal communications with local officials, teachers, religious leaders, or neighbors. A 1964 study of news sources in three Northeastern villages, moreover, found that gender played a large role in how men and women in rural areas received news and information. Figure 1 shows how men were significantly more connected to “official” sources of news.²³⁷

²³⁶ Peleggi, “Refashioning Civilization,” 71

²³⁷ This study defined news broadly, including economic (employment, wages, agricultural prices), political and social (government projects, political figures), and entertainment (merit-making ceremonies, festivals).

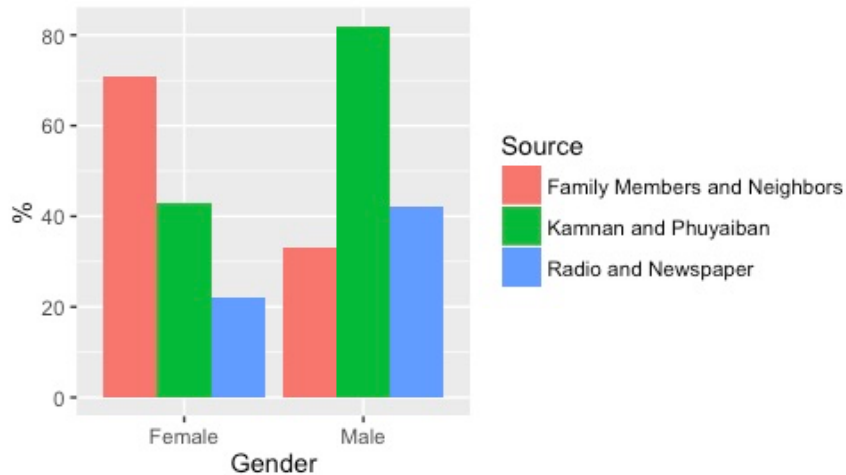


Figure 2.2 Sources of News according to Gender

There were also significant differences depending on socioeconomic status. The study noted that “village leaders” were the most likely to get their news from radio and newspapers. For common villagers, personal contacts were by far the most widely-relied upon sources of news.

Men were significantly more likely to hear news via the *kamnan* and *phuyaiban*, as well as through teachers and monks. Women, by contrast, did so through family members and neighbors. The study described the situation thus:

News concerning events outside the village is learned by village leaders (both formal and informal) through radio, publications, government officials or visits to town. [*Phuyaiban*] and [*Kamnan*] often pass on this information to heads of family in village meetings. Other village leaders transmit news through informal contacts usually with men. The village men in turn tell their relatives. Naturally, news is transmitted in many other manners. For example, village women often pick up bits of gossip [d]uring their visits to market towns.²³⁸

Likewise, radio and newspapers were generally restricted to those who could afford a radio or were literate. While radios were often listened to by groups of people, the dissemination of news through radios was controlled by their owners. For example, the mobile information teams observed that “[w]hile radio ownership in remote villages will not be widespread for many years to come, it is the people who count for the most who now have them—schoolteachers, abbots,

²³⁸ *Village Channels of Communication in Cortheast Thailand, A Pilot Study: Highlights of the Study* (Bangkok: U.S. Operations Mission to Thailand, Communications Media Division, 1964), 1.

village headmen or merchants. Not only do radio owners pass along the word but when a radio is turned on any who wish to may pause in the dooryard or on the porch to listen.”²³⁹ In practice, it appears that men were most likely to participate in direct listening. By contrast, news sources available in large public spaces were most accessible to women.

They also functioned as opportunities for entertainment. As the communications survey noted, “village film shows also serve as an excuse for large social gatherings during which young people get together to gossip.”²⁴⁰ While men were by far more likely to see films in towns, they were also apparently less inclined to attend films in villages.²⁴¹ Instead, women, children, young people, and “some elderly villagers” were more frequently in attendance.²⁴² This combination of a social space for gossip and the opportunity for attendance meant that the travelling village films offered women important opportunities for information. Besides the films themselves, team members, including doctors, politicians, and officials, would make speeches in between films, thereby providing more information on political issues and government programs in villages. Furthermore, the film shows attracted villagers from neighboring villages, even sometimes from across the Mekong in Laos.²⁴³ They would have brought their own news, and heard the latest gossip from the host village. Together, they all would watch the films, and in turn know that the other knew what they knew. The films events thus facilitated the spread of information in a variety of ways.

Cold Fire, with which this chapter began, was shown in situations very much like the ones described above. True to form, after *Cold Fire* was produced, the USIS showed the film and

²³⁹ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Report: Mobile Information Team I: Second Trip,” 1962, no page numbers.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 19.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 19.

²⁴² Ibid, 21.

²⁴³ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, “Eighth Mobile Information Team Trip,” 7.

conducted a survey in five Northeastern and five Central Thai villages during 1967. *Cold Fire* was shown in the evening, and the survey conducted the next day.²⁴⁴ The writer of the report on the film and survey explained the purpose as follows:

Because of the difficulty of obtaining Northeast dialect speaking actors, this film... was produced in Central Thai dialect although it was set in a Northeast village. The film is designed to alert villagers to the objectives and tactics of Communist subversives operating in Thailand. It also contains messages relating to what the Thai Government and Thailand's allies are doing to help Northeast villages, and messages intended to counter what the communists are saying about this help. The survey was designed to find out whether or not the film can be understood by Northeast villagers and whether, after seeing a film in which both the Communist line and the counter-fact are presented, audiences absorb the counter-fact or are left merely having heard and understood the Communist line.²⁴⁵

From this, it is clear that *Cold Fire* was an important test of USIS strategy and how its core messages, like the nature of US aid, were understood by villagers.

The villages visited included two provinces in the Northeast. These included Ban Noan Yai (Amphoe Khuang Nai), Ban Na-Rai Yai (Amphoe Amnat Charoen), and Ban Hua-tapan (Amphoe Amnat Charoen) in Ubon. In Nakhon Phanom, the team visited Ban La-kham and Ban Paloo-kha, both in Amphoe Mukdahan. In central Thailand, the film was shown in two provinces. In Nakhon Pathom, the team visited Ban Tham Sala (Amphoe Muang) and Ban Nongkrang (Amphoe Kamphaeng Saen). In Kanchanaburi, the trip included Ban Loomhin (Amphoe Phanom Thuan), Ban Khao-rak (Amphoe Phanom Thuan), and Ban Wai Neo (Amphoe Tamaka). While none of the villages were particularly central, the team chose those of varying levels of remoteness. Ban Noan Yai, for example, was two kilometers from the nearest highway, while Ban Na-Rai Yai was just half a kilometer away. Ban Hua-tapan and Ban Paloo-kha were the most remote, twelve and sixteen kilometers away from any main roads. These differences

²⁴⁴ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, Bangkok United States Information Service, *Film Study: "Cold Fire,"* 1967. The survey was not scientific, but did use a random sampling of between thirty and fifty-five adults in each village.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

would have had an impact on audiences' exposure to various forms of propaganda, such as radio and film, and perhaps dialect differences.

The effectiveness of the film, at least in terms of comprehension, was considered to be high. The team reported that:

- Three out of four could tell who in the film were helping the villagers (and how they were helping) and who were threatening or harming them (and how);
- 76% identified the terrorists in the movie as “communist terrorists” or “guerrillas”, 81% knew that all of them were Thais; 72% knew that they were acting on orders from outside Thailand (half said that these orders came from North Vietnam or Communist China);
- 86% recognized that these men were deceiving the villagers and most understood why;
- 81% were aware of the Communists' intent with regard to the young village men and 86% recognized some of the ways in which the Communist presence affected the women of the village;
- Over three fourths showed an understanding of Communist objectives in Thailand and most gave knowledgeable answers concerning their methods.²⁴⁶

These numbers indicate high levels of effectiveness, if not only of the film itself, then of broader propaganda efforts in which the film was imbedded.

Specifically, the survey found that whether or not a person was a frequent film-goer was highly correlated to comprehension of the film. In fact, the difference was often as high as 20-30 percentage points.²⁴⁷ In Ban Lao-kham, for example, no films had been shown in the village for the last four or five years. Comprehension of the film hovered around 58%, versus in the eighties for central areas with film exposure.²⁴⁸ When the surveyors tested the credibility of the film, meaning if villagers found the film believable or thought that similar events might happen in their own village, they once again found that familiarity with film and radio offered a distinct advantage.²⁴⁹ Furthermore, education was correlated with better comprehension of the films

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

intended message. These findings make sense, considering that similar pro-government, anti-communist messages were propagated in film, radio, and educational materials throughout the country. Increased exposure to other forms of information, whether through news, education, or entertainment, meant that respondents either understood the intended messages more rapidly or at least knew how to respond appropriately.

The benefit of previous exposure to films, radio, and education favored men over women in tests of comprehension. As discussed, men were significantly more likely to receive higher levels of education, listen to radios, and see films. Indeed, the survey revealed intriguing results in terms of the correlation between gender, geography, and comprehension. In central villages, men were only somewhat more likely to comprehend the film's messages. Out of the thirty-five questions that were evaluated based on gender, men and women understood the same amount in seven, women understood more in another seven, and men understood more in the remaining twenty-one. Clearly, men understood the films better than the women, or at least we able to give the expected answers more often.

However, in the northeast, these differences were far more pronounced. Women only understood a question better than men once, and in all other cases the difference in comprehension favored men. Looking at median numbers, northeastern men averaged higher than women by twelve percentage points. Central men were higher than women by only six points, or half the amount in the different between northeasterners. Central men were higher than northeastern men by just four points. By contrast, central women scored higher than northeastern women by ten points. Clearly both geography and gender mattered. But the combination of gender and geography for women in the northeast impacted their comprehension severely.

Furthermore, the survey report writer noted that the most important factor in film

comprehension was whether or not people sat through the entire film. In this respect, it is difficult to assess what factors drove people away or distracted them. But some of the reasons that were given included falling asleep, walking around, taking care of a baby, or rain.²⁵⁰ It is difficult to assess whether these reasons negatively impacted women's exposure to the film, but child-rearing almost certainly would have fallen on women. Because most of the people surveyed were of child-bearing age, it may well have been a compounding factor.

In the representation of the communist threat to men and women, the film and survey maintained gendered boundaries. While the film was clearly supposed to send the message that village women would suffer under communist infiltration (with the survey questions "Were lives of women affected?" followed by "Who?" and "How?"), the primary focus was on the communist desire to recruit young men. Women only suffered indirectly as a result of the decisions made by their male relatives and directly when communists raided villages. The themes of women's suffering were clear in a scene where Phin comforts Boonnam's mother, Nang Nuan, after he ran away. The two women sit and cry together, praying for Boonnam and wondering how he might ever return. Nang Nuan is deep in grief. Already a widow, she believed that she had lost her only son.

In this respect, the production of film and portrayal of gendered aspects of the communist agenda appears to have differed significantly from those in Vietnamese films (both North and South), and American films about Vietnam. In those films, women are just as likely as men to take up armed struggle, although their characters are still more likely to be involved in melodramatic stories. In the South Vietnamese film *Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống* (We Want to Live, 1956), the female protagonist, Lan, is driven mad by the conflict between her dedication to the communist struggle and demands that she sacrifice romance to become a cadre. As a piece of

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

anti-communist propaganda very much in the vein of *Cold Fire*, the differences between the personalities and choices available to Phin and Lan are notable.

Annette Hamilton, writing about gender in Vietnamese socialist films, also argued that the figure of the self-sacrificing mother was important in films during the 1960s and 1970s. Hamilton wrote that Vietnamese films “portrayed the need for women to be given recognition not just for their role in the war and independence struggles, but also in the development of the new socialist society.”²⁵¹ Furthermore, in American films about Vietnam, Vietnamese women are often depicted as suspicious and threatening, especially if they are from the north.²⁵² By contrast, *Cold Fire* makes it clear that women are not susceptible to communism.²⁵³

Thai female communists were, according to *Cold Fire*, impossible. Of course, that representation flew in the face of reality. As I will discuss in chapter five, women were active in radical and leftist movements as well. However, in denying the possibility, the film obscured the attractions of radical movements for women frustrated with their position in the social order. Not only were women active in political movements, but they were punished for their activities in gendered ways. Sociologist Sudarat Musikawong argued that activist women were, for example, subjected to sexual violence.²⁵⁴ She also observed that their participation was obscured in memorial works by male radicals.²⁵⁵ That women were so uniformly denied the possibility of

²⁵¹ Annette Hamilton, “Renovated: Gender and Cinema in Contemporary Vietnam,” *Visual Anthropology* 22, no. 2/3 (March 2009): 141–54.

²⁵² Michael Selig, for example, argued against Vietnam War films as a genre by observing their parallels with other Hollywood films, especially in “the films’ consistent effacements of the issues of race, class, nationalism, and gender (their historical misrepresentations, we might say) by focusing on their all too conventional concern with the narrative and visual reconstitution of the male subject and their almost always violent repression of the feminine.” Michael Selig, “Genre, Gender, and the Discourse of War: The A/historical and Vietnam Films,” *Screen* 34, no. 1 (1993): 1–18.

²⁵³ This representation follows Rachel Harrison’s discussion of masculinity in commercial Thai Cold War features. Harrison, “The Man with the Golden Gauntlets.”

²⁵⁴ Sudarat Musikawong, “Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence,” *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2011): 178.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

radicalism, and by extension political sensibilities, indicates that more clearly demarcated gender dynamics influenced political rhetoric in the Thai case.

While the communists in *Cold Fire* were all male, they were also all Thai. In the film, as well as in popular and political discourse, communists were traitors to the nation, or *khon khai chat* (literally “people selling the nation”). In the survey, several questions focused on the group of communists and their affiliations, including:

To what group did they belong?
Were all three Thais?
Were they independent or on outside orders?
If on outside orders, from where or whom?

The last two questions demonstrate the importance for the US and Thai governments to demonstrate that, even if the communists were Thai, they had been indoctrinated by foreigners. For the US and Thai governments, the connection between communism and foreignness, specifically with Vietnam, China, or the Soviet Union, was an important one to emphasize. In so doing, they could also make the argument that communism was anathema to Thai cultural and social values. Communist foreigners, even if only by suggestion, were also portrayed as engaged in an attack on the major tenants of Thainess: nation, religion, and monarchy.

Some of the viewers surveyed were sympathetic to the Thai communists, say, for example, that “the Communists don’t have anything to eat.” However, most gave responses that communists were a threat to Thailand as a nation and the Thai way of life.²⁵⁶ For example, in one response to the survey question, “What did [the communists] do to (harm) the village, one respondent said that:

He was a Communist agent who persuaded the villagers to join the Communists. He/they incited the villagers to overthrow the government and destroy the religion and the King; incited the villagers to misunderstand and set the villagers against the government.

²⁵⁶ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, United States Information Service, *Film Study: “Cold Fire.”* Appendix Table XIV-A.

He/they fooled the villagers, induced the villagers not to believe Kru Porn. They aimed at getting our country. They would overthrow the government. They destroyed the future of the nation.”²⁵⁷

Another person responded to questions about why the communists wanted to deceive villagers that “They regarded Buddhism as meaningless (unimportant). They wanted no religion and said that they would give tractors.”²⁵⁸

Yet another respondent linked nationalistic understandings of history to the reasons why America was supporting Thailand, claiming that they were there “in order to preserve Buddhism; because they recognize that Thailand has never abolished religion; because they saw that the Thais are honest; Thailand is the land of honesty, and has never betrayed any countries; because we asked them for help; because Thailand has never made war with other countries.”²⁵⁹ Many of these statements are factually incorrect. But they are important because they reveal both the content of the propaganda that people were taught, as well as, in some cases, what people knew they were supposed to say.

The statements also reveal the importance of psychological operations broadly and film specifically in the production of Thai Cold War common knowledge.²⁶⁰ The mobile teams’ visits or *Cold Fire* screenings were major events in the villages, as evidenced by the large crowds they drew. Since everyone, potentially, would have seen the films, the films would have represented a point of common knowledge with regard to any of the themes that they touched upon. The film screenings were a common experience, and therefore so were the messages. That the experience was shared does not inherently indicate that the intended message was effectively received.

Indeed, as I discussed in chapter one, audiences collectively not behaving as intended, as in the

²⁵⁷ Ibid, Appendix Table VI-A.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Chwe, *Rational Ritual*, 5.

case of the royal anthem, posed a significant danger. Regardless, the films became common reference points by which villagers would have engaged with Cold War national issues.

For its part, *Cold Fire*, in its didactic connections between nationalism and anti-communism, evidences a fusion of national loyalty (especially according to the love of nation/religion/king formula) and anti-communism in US and Thai propaganda. This fusion was clear, for example, in references to the band of communists near the village. The group was repeatedly referred to as *phuak jon communit*, or the communist bandits. After a report of communist activity, the police visit the village and lecture the villagers on what to do about the danger. They emphasize that, “There are bandits coming to raid the village. But these are not just any bandits. They are *communist* bandits!”²⁶¹ Similarly, when Phin explains to Nang Nuan that Boonnam likely cannot return, she tells her that Boonnam did not join just any group of bandits, but a communist group. Nang Nuan asks Phin to explain what the difference is. Phin responds that, “they are much more evil. They are brutal, heartless, and kill others very easily (*phuak ni, man lai kwa phuak jon tamada mak na. hot hiam, tharun, lae kha khon ngai ngai.*).” Upon hearing this, Nang Nuan despairs, and asks the gods to help her.

Notably absent was any description of political ideology held by the communists. Clearly it was meant, on the one hand, to inform villagers who were thought to not understand communism as a political and economic ideology. On the other hand, the message was intended to connect the communists to criminal and subversive legacies. However, bandits, especially *nakleng*, have a long history of almost Robin Hood-like status. As anthropologist David Johnston argued, “Crime and banditry persist in rural Thai society, they continue to enjoy a degree of popular tolerance and acceptance, and attempts to suppress them can result in heightened tensions between the central government and local peoples and, in the short run at least, in

²⁶¹ *Mi jon khao plon mu ban ni. Mai chai phuak jon tamada. Tae wa pen phuak jon communit!*

increased violence.”²⁶² Regardless, the message connecting communists to banditry, and positioning them as a dangerous form of banditry was clear. Just to be sure that the point was taken, one of the survey questions asked “Did the communists act as ordinary bandits?”

In contrast to the portrayals of the communists and their foreign allegiances, the Thai government’s alliance with the Americans and American aid was shown positively. Responses once again may have indicated both a comprehension of the message and an awareness of the appropriate response. One respondent, when asked about what the Thai government was doing to help rural villagers, replied that “Because now the Americans have come to help, so the Thai government must help too.”²⁶³ Another, in response to a question about foreign aid, said it was “Because of the SEATO treaty; because America is our ally and is on the free world side; because we are on the same free world side; because they wish Thailand well and are allies; because they are not with the Communists; they are neighbors, relatives; (because we are) of the same blood; (we) love each other.”²⁶⁴ Nonetheless, others displayed confusion, or perhaps snark. One person responded that American supported Thailand because, “Thailand is their colony; they would make Thailand a colony as the Communists said.”²⁶⁵

At the same time, *Cold Fire* was likely one of the earliest productions set in a rural village in Thailand. In terms of the audience’s connection with the film, this was an important move. Previously, the films viewed by provincial audiences were geographically distant from their own lives. The clear majority were foreign films, and therefore set abroad. But even Thai films were generally produced in Bangkok studios. The Thai ambassador to Japan’s speech about

²⁶² David Johnston, “Bandit, Nakleng, and Peasant in Rural Thai Society,” *Contributions to Asian Studies* 15 (1980): 90–101.

²⁶³ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, United States Information Service, *Film Study: “Cold Fire.”* Appendix Table XII.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

filming *Santi-Vina* gave some indication as to the difficulty of filming movies in rural areas, not least the result of transporting technology and people and the impact of climate on the celluloid. Moreover, because Bangkok audiences were previously viewed as the most profitable, it was their tastes and interests that drove film content. But with the expansion of rural markets, provincial settings became more common.

Even then, films dealing with contemporary social and political issues did not become common until the 1970s “Thai New Wave” generation. *Cold Fire*, therefore, was one of the first instances in which rural villagers were able to view their own lives through the lens of a feature-length film. Given the prestige of motion pictures among rural audiences, the very fact that their lives were being broadcast in this way would have granted the film some legitimacy and popularity. This fact made the assertion that the film was based on real events, a claim that was not proven, all the more significant in terms of viewer psychology. Indeed, the film’s follow-up survey found that 85% of audiences believed that the story really happened in Northeastern villages.

However, the survey never addressed the issue of whether villagers’ comprehension could be tested in the first place. It was assumed that survey questions formulated in Washington and Bangkok had relevance for what communism, development, the United States, and social hierarchies meant to villagers. The surveyors never accounted for the potentially vast differences in the perspectives and world view of people so removed from the context in which the surveys were produced. Ultimately, the surveys are more useful for revealing what the state wanted the villagers to comprehend and the extent to which villagers knew how to engage with the demands of the state.

Benedict Anderson noted a similar dynamic with a contemporary film, Aphichatphong

Weerasethakul's *Sat Pralat* (Tropical Malady, 2004). While urban Bangkok bourgeois found the film "difficult" or "abstract," people with experience in the rural, jungle settings showcased in the film understood it more readily.²⁶⁶ The difference in understanding came from distinct relationships that people had with the environment, animals, and film. *Chao ban* understood the film in part because it was produced from within the world in which they grew up.²⁶⁷ In contrast, the messages in a film like *Cold Fire* wouldn't have been naturally understood, but might have been learned. Thus, it is perfectly possible that the villagers comprehended the task at hand very well. Whether and how they understood the film in the way that an American or a Thai Bangkokian would have is another matter.

Nonetheless, the mobile team program and *Cold Fire* were viewed as successes in the 1960s. However, by the early 1970s the programs fell out of favor. The market was changing. As the 1960s wore on, films became available through provincial theaters and commercial traveling film circuits. Villagers were also exposed to government-generated films more frequently, since the successes of the USIS teams spawned imitations by the Royal Thai Army, Border Patrol Police, Public Relations Department, and US-Thai Mobile Development Units.²⁶⁸ The USIS teams were no longer the sole source of film entertainment for villagers. Moreover, as radio frequencies expanded, so did ownership and the importance of radio (which was already the most common source of news). The expansion of radio in Isan was also due to the popularity of regional broadcast stations, such as Radio Khonkaen.

The US State Department ended the mobile team program in 1971, although the various

²⁶⁶ Benedict Anderson, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Sat Pralaat*," in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014), 137.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 138.

²⁶⁸ US National Archives at College Park, RG 306, "Fourteenth Mobile Information Team Trip," 3.

domestic iterations remained.²⁶⁹ Ironically, while assertions of Thainess were once viewed as critical to anti-communist efforts, the role of USIS programs in promoting those values also contributed to the program's defunding. One US diplomat recalled changing attitudes in the early 1970s:

We had a program which had been instituted with the purpose of solidifying the ties behind their king. This... had been pretty well been scotched by Washington because they didn't feel that this was the kind of thing we should be doing. We were in effect a PR (public relations) unit for the Thai government.²⁷⁰

Nonetheless, the teams operated during a brief, but important, moment in Thailand's modern development and the emergence of its cinematic public sphere. For a time, the imperatives of national development meant that the village increased in significance at the same time that the government largely controlled the flow of information into villages. This was especially true of film, due to the expense of cinema technologies. But by the 1970s, the moment was over.

Despite that, the efforts of the programs proved more durable. In 2011, *Cold Fire* was placed on the list of Thai National Heritage Films. The list, created that same year, annually registers twenty-five Thai films. Created by the Thai Film Archive and the Ministry of Culture, the project is part of broader efforts to improve knowledge of Thai filmmaking and to preserve old films. In 2011, a diverse range of films were included on the list, from *Cold Fire* to *Thongpan* (a "communist" film banned in 1976 after the military coup) to a documentary film about the 1942 Bangkok floods.²⁷¹ In 2012, *Cold Fire* was again viewed by Thai audiences in a special film series titled "Films Seen by His Majesty the King." Since then, it was also shown at the Sixth Bangkok Experimental Film Festival in 2012 as part of the theme "Raiding the

²⁶⁹ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985*.

²⁷⁰ Charles Stuart Kennedy interview, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Oral History Interviews, "Paul Good," August 2000.

²⁷¹ Thai Film Archive, "List of National Heritage Films: The First Year," Accessed at <http://www.fapot.org/th/conservation.php?mid=20>.

Archives.” While the film was produced by the USIS in order to support the agenda of a joint American-Thai anti-communist, military scheme, the film continues to have life in modern Thailand.

However, the film, like the surveys and the mobile information team reports, highlights the layered influences on the production and consumption of propaganda during the Cold War period. While the influence of the US was clear, it was filtered through Thai political and social discourses and conceptions of hierarchical and gendered relationships. Likewise, although central Thai interests were prominent in development schemes and information presented to villagers, local politicians and village leaders were instrumental in how they reached Thai villagers. The circulation of information in provincial Thailand and knowledge of the “nation” was a messy amalgamation of conceptions of the historically situated, but newly modernizing “Thai” village. The end result was not just the development of anti-communist sentiment, but also the troubled beginnings of incorporating provincial citizens into public discourses of national belonging.

CHAPTER 3

THE ADULTERER: CENSORSHIP, MORALITY, AND FOREIGN FILMS

“The film depicts adultery (*kan khop chu*) between a woman, who has a family already, and her husband’s male friend. The story violates the good morality (*sinlatham*) and customs (*prapheni*) of the Thai people. Not only does the depiction of the adulterous relationship (*khwam samphan thang chu sao*) show behavior contrary to morality, but it has characteristics that will arouse sexual desire (*yuayu kamarom*).” –Board of Film Censorship banning *The Touch*²⁷²

On February 24th, 1972, the Appeals Committee of the Board of Film Censorship of Thailand met for an official screening of Ingmar Bergman’s latest production, *The Touch*.²⁷³ The censors had banned the film, about a violent romance between a Swedish housewife and her American lover, the previous December.²⁷⁴ The adultery-centered storyline was found to violate Thai morality.²⁷⁵ Just three months before the Appeals Committee met, Prime Minister Thanom dissolved the constitution and parliament and returned the country to military dictatorship.²⁷⁶ In light of these upheavals, we might expect the censors to have found the saga of an unhappy Swedish housewife to be beneath their concern. But they did not. The rapid urbanization, modernization, and visibility of the sex trade in the city, much of it brought by the changes inaugurated under American Cold War intervention, arguably made the censors more sensitive to

²⁷² NA ๙๕ 0701.9.10.15

²⁷³ Ingmar Bergman, *The Touch*, 1971. While Bergman was a Swedish director, he directed the film in collaboration with an American studio. The dialogue, furthermore, was in English. While the film was set in Sweden, it prominently featured an American anthropologist, a figure that surely would have felt familiar in Thailand by the early 1970s. The censors often noted the country of a film’s origin, although they did not in this case. So it is unclear whether or not they would have considered the film American, Western, European, or something else, if they considered it at all.

²⁷⁴ I address the two divisions of the Board of Film Censorship after 1962 as “Representatives” to refer to the Board of Film Censorship Representatives and the “Appeals Committee” or “the Committee” to refer to the more superior Board of Film Censorship Appeals. When referring to the board as a whole, I use “the Board” or “the Board of Film Censorship”.

²⁷⁵ NA ๙๕ 0701.9.10.15. The decision was appealed by Twentieth-Century Fox, Thailand.

²⁷⁶ Thanom was Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat’s chosen successor, and was a vital part of the authoritarian regime from the 1950s. Student and labor activists, intellectuals, and others in a growing anti-authoritarian movement had successfully pressured Thanom to make way for a parliament and constitution in 1969, although the military remained largely in power. Thanom’s reversion to authoritarianism in 1972 provided the catalyst that eventually led to the mass uprising and return to democracy in 1973.

issues of family and sexual relationships. The Committee, composed of senior bureaucrats from many of Thailand's most important government institutions, upheld the decision to ban *The Touch* from playing in Thai movie theaters.

By the early 1970s, foreign films from non-communist countries occupied an uncomfortable space between Thailand's modernizing initiatives and cultural nationalism. American films dominated the commercial film market in Thailand, and particularly in Bangkok. However, as the decline of US psychological operations highlighted, American intervention was ending. At the same time, state officials exerted a modern form of Thai nationalism characterized by gendered cultural difference with the West. Banning *The Touch* was defensible, and indeed necessary, in order to protect Thai culture and to enforce Buddhist morality. Indeed, the status of women and the preservation of feminine morality had become a national security issue. If the mobile team program's promotion of feminine, rural authenticity evidenced the confluence of Thai and US interests in combatting anti-communism, censorship of foreign films, many of them American, highlight the ambivalences that characterized the "American Era" and Thailand's engagement with the social and cultural entailments of American Imperium. The United States, despite being Thailand's most important ally, presented a threat to the security of Thailand's cultural state.

The decision on *The Touch* also reflected the state's growing reliance on prohibition to control film exhibition. It came after more than a decade of increasing film censorship under Sarit and Thanom, with the greatest increase occurring between 1962 and 1972. The significance of censorship evidences the authoritarian state's concern with cinema as a productive site for the construction of societal mores. It underscored the significance of the bureaucratic censorship regime's efforts to affect the constitution of the modern Thai social imaginary, the dynamic

interplay of worldviews and practices that define how people “fit together” within society.²⁷⁷

Film censorship in Thailand was used for the seemingly contradictory purposes to promote middle class modernity and, at the same time, to assert social hierarchies based on notions of a traditional, Buddhist moral order. From this perspective, films provided a venue for the depiction of deviant social practices. To not censor risked the mass consumption of alternative models by Thai audiences. Censorship of morality in films was thus a particularly salient aspect of broader state efforts to regulate norms of social appropriateness. While propaganda films promoted Thai culture as the antithesis of communism, censorship of Western films asserted the same in response to Americanization.

Intriguingly, and contrary to most conceptions of Cold War-era censorship in Thailand, the censors were not primarily occupied with criticisms of the government or portrayals of communism.²⁷⁸ Instead, they most often focused on depictions of sexuality, intimacy, and marital relationships. The censors clearly perceived films as having a sensory impact on audiences. The majority of censored films were deemed to be “arousing sexual pleasure” (*yuayu kamarom*) and “violating morality” (*khad to sinlatham*). As foreign films included more controversial depictions of sexuality and intimate relationships following the decline of censorship in the United States and Europe, Thai censors often objected to their content.²⁷⁹ In censoring these stimulating films, moreover, the members of the Board displayed a clear concern about the types of feelings and thoughts aroused within the population.

²⁷⁷ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁷⁸ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1992,” 71-71

²⁷⁹ Films that were censored and appealed included notable and acclaimed works such as *West Side Story* (1961) and *Virgin Spring* (1960), as well as less reputable productions, like *The Touchables* (1968) (“fidgety mod pornography” according to the New York Times) and *Chained Gang Woman* (1971). *The New York Times*, November 21, 1968.

Among the films censored for sexual indecency, a large number of films were banned due to prominent displays of adultery.²⁸⁰ In 1971, for example, records are available on twenty-seven of the thirty-nine total films banned by the censors, revealing that (at least) ten films were banned for adultery that year.²⁸¹ The use of morality (*sinlatham*) by the censors reveals ongoing attempts by bureaucrats and the urban middle-class to define Thai culture as simultaneously modern and traditional, and to cultivate a Buddhist ethical framework for the nation. Adultery became a major site of debate in that process.

The censors' focus on adultery was connected to contemporary changes in global film censorship, the rise of domestic women's rights movements, and legal challenges to family law. It also evidenced anxieties regarding public expressions of sexual intimacy by the bureaucracy. By the 1950s, the bureaucracy was firmly ensconced at the apex of the Thai middle class.²⁸² Public adherence to key social norms of sexual behavior, especially the image of heterosexual marital monogamy, was fundamental to urban Bangkok middle class and bureaucratic identities. However, scandals over the extramarital affairs of government officials frequently made the news, generating tensions with middle-class ideals. As adultery became an act simultaneously

²⁸⁰ Sathian Jantimathorn, "Thai Censors and Banned Films in Thailand (In Thai)," *Social Science Review (Sangkhomsat Parithat)* 10, no. 3 (1972): 33.; NA ๙๕ 0701.9.10.15. In the same year at least eighteen films were banned for reasons including inappropriate sexual content, such as nudity or teenage sex, in addition to adultery. The remaining nine films were censored for political content (such as student protests), and for being produced in a communist country. From the available data of films from 1968-1972, 25% of the censored films included depictions of adultery and 65% inappropriate sexual content (including adultery). While the incomplete nature of the documents on censorship makes complete analysis impossible, it is clear that the regulation of sexual content in films was an overriding concern of the censors

²⁸¹ The official ban on films from communist countries also contributes to the difficulty in accessing censorship patterns. This paper is not arguing that censorship of political expression was unimportant, but rather that censorship of sexual appropriateness was a major prerogative of the state.

²⁸² For studies of the Thai bureaucracy in the 1950s and 1960s, see Fred Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966); William Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966); David Wilson, *Politics in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962). I use the term "middle class" to refer to educated Thai and Sino-Thai Bangkokians, especially those working as bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, police and military officers, journalists, and intellectuals. All of these groups were represented on the Board of Film Censorship.

regulated and committed by the bureaucracy, it became a critical issue on which concerns regarding middle-class, urban identity centered.

Despite the censors' evident concern with depictions of sex and sexuality in public media, academic discussions of how Thai governments conceptualized threats to the state during the Cold War period dwell largely on political and economic issues.²⁸³ Instead, I argue that regulation of sexual morality was critical to responses to changing social dynamics and internationalization in the 1960s and 1970s. The developmental and international strategic priorities of the Thai state during the "American Era" introduced goods and infrastructure required by modern capitalist consumer societies, including sensuous Hollywood films. But these developments, as I detailed in chapter two, also reinforced conservative notions of a Thai cultural and social order. Moreover, the connection between the visibility of the sex industry in Bangkok and areas surrounding US bases reinforced women's sexual behavior and feminine morality as a site of vulnerability to the Thai nation.²⁸⁴ The censors dealt with those contradictions by appealing to, and thereby reinforcing, so-called traditional norms of "Thai" behavior and morality. Once again, those constructions were mapped on to the female body.

While foreign films with prominent displays of adultery were banned, domestic productions operated within a different set of constraints. Domestic films were produced within a regime of self-censorship enforced by both the state and middle-class, educated filmmakers. I explore the differences in the production and reception of foreign and domestic films through a comparison of a Thai production, Piak Poster's 1972 *The Adulterer (Chu)*, with a foreign film,

²⁸³ David Morell and Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1982); Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*; Fineman, *A Special Relationship*.

²⁸⁴ Leslie Ann Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders: Gender, National Identity, and Prostitution Policy in Thailand* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 30.

Bergman's *The Touch* (1970).²⁸⁵ As a domestic film director, Piak had the social and cultural knowledge necessary to produce a film that drew on the appropriate moral framework. *The Adulterer* simultaneously depicted typically controversial subjects, while still operating within mainstream discourses of Buddhist moral decency and karma. *The Touch*, by contrast, was produced in a different social and political context. When the film crossed national borders, the implications of its message changed. I use the comparison to explore dynamics of social regulation that were masked by domestic self-censorship. The gendered regulation of sexuality in particular was cloaked in concepts such as "morality" and "tradition." Or, as the censors might say, "This depiction of adultery violates all of the beautiful and good standards of morality of the Thai people."

This chapter examines the social and political implications of censorship of sexuality broadly and adultery specifically in Thai cinema. I focus on censorship of films from the early 1960s through 1972, when the most complete records are available.²⁸⁶ These years also spanned the period of authoritarian rule under the military dictatorships of Sarit and Thanom. As film censorship increased, so too did the censorship of depictions of adultery. I begin with an overview of the history of censorship in Thailand from the 1930s, before discussing the implications of censorship practices for the 1960s-1970s.

"I'm evil! I'm a very bad person. I have a lover! This whore is dirty. I should die! I should die. I should die! I have a lover! I should die!" So proclaims Riam, the female lead in Piak Poster's 1972 hit film *The Adulterer* (*Chu*). At the start of the film, Riam survives a boat crash and washes ashore on a remote and idyllic island off the coast of Thailand. Choeng, the lone inhabitant of the island for many years, finds her. Choeng rapes her, after which the two live

²⁸⁵ Piak Poster, *Chu (The Adulterer)* (Atsawin Phapphayon, 1972).

²⁸⁶ This study is based on documents of the Board of Film Censorship from 1930 to 1972, which was under the Ministry of the Interior after its creation in 1930. The board was moved to the Police Department in 1972.

together as husband and wife although they are not legally married. Riam becomes pregnant shortly after with their child Daeng. Jumping ahead to four years later, the family appears happy in the island paradise. However, disaster strikes when Choeng is blinded after getting fish poison in his eyes while diving. When Riam calls on the nearest doctor, she finds instead his new assistant, Thep, Riam's former lover. She asks Thep to help treat her husband, showing him a bag of pearls that Choeng gave her to pay the doctor. Instead of treating Choeng, however, Thep gives him a sleeping drug. Thep reveals to Riam that he intends to find Choeng's secret stash of pearls, which Riam understands to be enormous. He threatens her that he has her husband and child at his mercy, and rapes her. After this turn of events, Riam colludes with Thep to drug Choeng.

However, after Choeng fails to take the pills one night, he discovers the intrigue and affair between Thep and Riam. Pretending to still be blind, he convinces them that he would like to share his pearl stash with them. He tells them that he hid the pearls off the shore of another isolated island. Once there, Choeng reveals that he can see and that he knows everything. Choeng holds the two at gunpoint, and forces Thep to tie Riam's hands together. It is then that Riam so dramatically admits that she has a lover. In a surprise twist, however, she claims that her lover's name is "Choeng" and that Thep was in fact her original husband. Choeng decides to let the two go free. But Thep is still determined to find the pearls and initiates a gunfight with Choeng. While attempting to defend Choeng and Daeng, Riam is shot and killed by Thep. Furious at the loss of Riam, Choeng beats Thep unconscious. He gathers Riam's body and brings her along with Daeng into the boat to return to their home. Thep awakens alone. Unable to swim, he is left stranded to die on an island where no one ever goes.

While *The Adulterer* opens with luxurious scenes from Thailand's southern islands, the opening scene of Ingmar Bergman's *The Touch* features the rapid juxtaposition of a corpse's face and the wedding rings on the dead woman's hands. The images are seen through the eyes of Karin, the daughter of the dead woman. The loud ticking of the clock on the woman's hospital-bed side table and the chimes of Big Ben in the background provide the soundtrack to the scene. As Karin leaves the hospital room after a last kiss goodbye, her departing glance returns again to her mother's hands. But before she can leave, a nurse stops Karin to ask if she would like her mother's wedding rings. The nurse retrieves them before Karin can answer, and gives them to her. Karin flees to a coatroom, and sobs while cradling her mother's rings. It is in this state that Karin first meets her future lover, David.

If *The Adulterer* blurred the lines of what constituted marriage and adultery, *The Touch* immediately makes it clear that the story is about the bonds of formal marriage. Karin has a seemingly wonderful life with her husband, Andreas, and her two children in a large home in a small Swedish village. Her daily life is portrayed early on in a sequence following the daily chores—making beds, vacuuming, and so on—that fill her day. The cheery music, reminiscent of 1950s commercial pop music, links Karin's activities to those of any housewife in any American-style suburb, perhaps a nod to the international audience of the film. Although the scenes establish a type of tediousness to Karin's life, her reasons for the affair with David, a visiting anthropologist, are unclear. David suffers from severe depression, and emotionally and physically abuses Karin. The affair continues for years. Aware of the affair, Andreas waits for Karin to end it herself. Finally, David leaves Karin, just as she discovers that she is pregnant. In the end, the future of Karin and Andreas' relationship is unresolved. David's return in the last

scene of the film is met with Karin's clear resolve not to reinitiate the affair. But her future and the future of her unborn child is left unclear.

Despite the inclusion of repeated rape scenes, violence, murder, adultery, and attempted robbery in *The Adulterer*, the film had no problem passing the film censors nor was it received with any controversy by critics once it began showing in theaters. By contrast, both the Censorship Officials and the Appeals Board unanimously voted to ban *The Touch*. Rather than citing David's abuse of Karin or the inclusion of nudity, the censors clearly stated that the depiction of adultery justified the banning of the film. The differing reactions to the films is made comprehensible by contextualizing them first in the history of film censorship from the creation of the first Film Act in 1930, and second in the social and political climate of the 1960s to 1970s period.

King Vajiravudh was the first of the Chakri monarchs to consider formal regulation of the film industry. As the size of the industry increased, the government grew concerned over its potential impacts on citizens. It is also likely that the broader context of political opposition and criticisms of the monarchy increased Vajiravudh's consideration of regulation of the public sphere more generally. Furthermore, censorship was increasingly common in colonial Southeast Asia more generally. Indeed, Siam was relatively slow to institute any formal policies. Europeans and Americans had increased their efforts to censor films played in their Southeast Asia colonies. The American-colonized Philippines, Act. No. 3582 created the first Board of Censorship in 1929. American commercial films were often targeted due to the perception that they would propagate notions of independence and revolution.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ John A Lent, *The Asian Film Industry* (London: Christopher Helm, 1990); J. Burns, "Excessive Americanisms: Hollywood in the British Empire, 1918-1930," *Britain and the World* 7 (2014): 196–211; Ai Lin Chua, "Singapore's 'Cinema-Age' of the 1930s: Hollywood and the Shaping of Singapore Modernity," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 592–604.

Before the institution of formal censorship, informal censorship operated through the 1920s, with royal approval needed for all activities related to cinema, from participation as an actor to exhibition.²⁸⁸ This oversight has often been attributed to the desire by royal parties for Siam to appear civilized in the eyes of Western viewers. In 1928, for example, *Amnat Mut* (Black Power) became the first domestically produced film to be banned due to its portrayal of prostitutes and Chinese gangsters.²⁸⁹ After news that Henry Macrae had filmed an execution scene in his 1930 *Suwanna of Siam*, Prince Kamphaengphet set up a committee to censor the film prior to its release. The motivation, by most accounts, was to protect the image of Siam. As one newspaper commented, “I would like to blame the local officer who did not save the honour of the country by forbidding them to [film the execution]. The execution will represent the barbarism of Siam.”²⁹⁰

Indeed, anxiety over inappropriate portrayals of Siam in films abroad is clear. A 1931 letter from the Siamese Legation in London, for example, was sent to Bangkok after a film showed in a London theater depicting Thailand in an inappropriate manner. The author pondered whether or not the legation should respond by showing films more favorable to the nation.²⁹¹ A similar attitude is revealed in reactions to the production and exhibition of the 1927 silent feature *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness*. Produced by Americans Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper, the film chronicled the life of a Northeastern farmer in the Siamese jungle, complete

²⁸⁸ Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, “Direction Unknown,” *Cinemaya* 4 (1989): 58-60.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 60. Even after major changes were made to the film story and title in order to pass the King’s censorship, theatres refused to show the film. This was perhaps the first instance of another layer of censorship in Siam/Thailand, in which business’s refusal to exhibit films passed by censors complicates the ability of filmmakers to show their work. This form of censorship occurred recently in the cases of Pen-ek Rattananuang’s 2013 *Paradoxocracy* (Prachathipa-“Thai”) and the refusal of the Apex Cinema Group to show *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay- Part 1* (2014) after a group of students adopted the film’s three-finger salute to protest the military dictatorship.

²⁹⁰ *The Sambhand Thai*, v1 n23, June 13, 1923, 1. Quoted in Chalida Uabumrungjit, “Suvanna of Siam and the Censorship Mindset of Pre-the 1930’s Film Act” (The 10th International Conference on Thai Studies, Thammasat University, Thailand, 2008).

²⁹¹ Chamroenlak Thanawangnoi, *Prawattisat Phapphayon Thai : Tangtae Raek Roem Chon Sin Samai Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi 2* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Publications, 2001).

with man-eating tigers and marauding elephants. The film was shot in Nan province. After the filmmakers received the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Prince Damrong in the production of the film, they wrote to Damrong requesting official recognition of the film. Apparently, they were under the impression that the international success of the film would be viewed favorably by the Siamese government.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs thought otherwise. In a letter to Damrong (to which Damrong subsequently agreed), the Chief Minister wrote that, rather than ask for further support and recognition from the Siamese government, Schoedsack and Cooper should instead be thanking them for their assistance.²⁹² Ultimately, the filmmakers had to make do with the public favor of Prince Rangsit, who wrote that,

I am delighted that this, the best picture of its kind, is made in Siam and gives information about my native country, which I adore mostly, to the world. This picture wins praise for Siam and its population. Such a picture broadens the horizons of the public.

The Lao farmer, in his hard struggle for existence, is a pioneer of Siamese culture and civilization in the jungle. The film itself I would like to call the High Song of human working power, energy and ability. Its hero, the Lao farmer Kru, is in this picture the symbolism of Siam.

Ironically, it was this very content, and the depiction of the Lao farmer as representative of Siam, that offended the officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the letter denying the request for recognition, the Chief Minister complained that the film portrayed the people of Siam in the same way that the people of Africa might be.²⁹³

However, it is also likely that, given the realities of Siamese film distribution, the authorities were concerned with domestic, as well as international, audiences. Certainly, censorship operated informally based on what was considered appropriate. For example, although the Prajadhipok expressed dissatisfaction at the portrayal of Siam in *Amnat Mut*, he also

²⁹² NA น๓ 84.4.

²⁹³ Ibid.

granted the filmmaker the right to screen the film for as long as it took to recoup the cost of production. However, after news leaked regarding the king's opinion, the police banned the film altogether for its inappropriate depictions of Siam. Even after the filmmaker cut the offending scenes and released the film under a new title, Bangkok theaters refused to play it.²⁹⁴

Amidst ongoing rumors of formal censorship legislation, a debate broke out in the Thai press over the appropriateness of that action. In 1919, the subject came up in a column for *Siam Ratsadon*. In it, the author explained the subject of film regulation:

Film inevitably gives knowledge to its diverse audiences, and the films that various companies order into Siam all pass the censor. But now there is news that the Ministry of the Interior intends to institute censorship in Siam of another layer, due to their understanding that films are the “teacher” that instructs criminals. Regarding this, if this is true, it would be agreeable.

On our side, we have the opposite view, which is that we think that films inevitably teach audiences *not* to be criminals. Because in each and every film that shows stories about criminals or bandits, the criminal is always the one to lose. Even if film is a “teacher” of the finesse and method of many things for criminals, film will also teach the method for police to catch them in the same way, no? And if we believe that film as a “teacher” of criminals must be banned, the police will never have the opportunity to study ways to catch them either. At this time, the Gulf of Siam is not shut. If those bastard criminals that study films creep in from outside—even just one or two people—will we all be destroyed because we will not have that knowledge? Will they easily eat us raw?²⁹⁵

While clearly intended in jest and to poke fun at the concern over the impact of films, the article captured the early opposition to film censorship. Yet the debate continued for many years.²⁹⁶

In part, the debate concerned whether the Thai censors should be regulating foreign films at all. As a writer in Thailand's first cinema magazine, *Siam Phapphayon*, argued, films produced in other countries, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, were already censored for their domestic markets. Therefore, it didn't make sense for Thai censors to, in

²⁹⁴ Chalida Uabumrungjit, “Suvarna of Siam.”

²⁹⁵ Dome Sukwong, *King Prajadhipok and Film (Phrabat somdet phra pokklao kap phapphayon)* (Bangkok: Tono, 1996), 163.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 164.

effect, double-censor those films. Films arrived in Thailand already labeled with the country of origin's censorship approval seal. When films were exported and imported amongst free nations, such as the United States and England, the receiving country felt no need to review the film's status.²⁹⁷

Furthermore, as one newspaper argued, in "countries like Singapore, Burma, and India, that have censors cut films again, it is because those are colonial states... that don't allow subjects to know about the outside world or capitalism. That they slash American film is because the censors in those countries are very strict with American films, which are currently flourishing."²⁹⁸ By implication, Thailand was a free country, and therefore did not need colonial-style censorship. Double-censorship, that is to say, was a mark of a colonized nation. Therefore, the newspaper claimed, it was only domestic productions that needed to be censored by Thai officials.

But even at this early stage, national differences in what was considered morally acceptable to show on screen played a role in considerations of censorship. On 28 September 1923, the author "Trident" (*Drisun*) argued in *Siam Ratsadon* that censorship was necessary to protect Siam from the threat of foreign film content. In outlining what needed to be screened by the censors, the author included, "All films that companies or individuals import to show in the country must pass the censorship representatives first. If they include stories involving criminals committing robbery, murder, and shameful stories of adultery as well. The censors should remove them, force the distributors to send them out of the country, or ban them from exhibition

²⁹⁷ Chamroenlak, *Prawattisat Phapphayon Thai*.

²⁹⁸ Dome, *King Prajadhipok*, 165.

in the country definitely.”²⁹⁹ Even in the earliest discussions of film censorship, adultery figured prominently.

In an April 1930 article in the newspaper *Nang Sanuk*, or *Film Fun*, a writer by an author with the pen name *Suwan Dara*, or “Heavenly Star,” discussed film censorship in Germany and France. After explaining the concept of censorship to the readers, the author criticized the practice, writing that censorship boards had more *khwam-soe*, or silliness, than *khwam-sen*, or sense.³⁰⁰ This play on the Thai adoption of the word “censor” used the similar sounding words *soe* and *sen* in opposite order, suggests how ridiculous the word must have sounded to Thai speakers’ ears in 1930. That the author felt the need to explain censorship indicated that most readers either did not know about the concept as applied to film and/or did not know the borrowed English word “censor.”

The discussion of censorship was a timely one, since from 1923-1930 the Siamese government under the absolute monarchy considered legislation to regulate the film industry. Finally, in 1930 the King Prajadhipok’s government passed the Film Act. This broad law aimed to regulate every aspect of the film industry, from production to advertising and exhibition. The most commonly used part was section four, which stated that: “It shall be unlawful to produce or to exhibit in a place of public entertainment any motion picture or advertisement which, by itself or by its probable consequences, is or is likely to be, contrary to public order or good morals, or to export any motion picture or advertisement of such nature produced in the Kingdom.”³⁰¹ In every document banning films from Thailand from the 1930s through the 1970s, the censors used section four as their mandate. The law also created the Board of Film Censorship. Board members followed official guidelines produced by the Ministry of the Interior that prohibited

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 168.

³⁰⁰ *Nang Sanuk*, April 7, 1930.

³⁰¹ NA น๑ 84/10

insults of religion, pornography, insults to the monarchy, content that might create distrust in government, and “presenting an example of bad habits,” among other categories. While the guideline’s language framed censors’ decisions, its ambiguity allowed the censors broad control over what was deemed “inappropriate.” Decisions were made through a combination of institutional and individual motivations.

The guidelines are critical evidence in understanding the fate of films such as *The Adulterer* and *The Touch*. While the guidelines provided the framework for asserting “Thai” morality, they were also clearly modeled on the guidelines used by the Official Censor of Cinematographs in the British-controlled Straits Settlements.³⁰² Similarities may be seen in the censorship of cruelty to animals, offenses to religious feelings, depictions of famous criminals, and sexual indecency.³⁰³ Thai censorship was also similar to the top-down censorship practices employed in Southeast Asian colonial states. David Newman observed these differences between the colonial frameworks in the Straits Settlements, Shanghai International Settlement, and Hong Kong, which were enforced by the police and legislated by governing institutions, and Britain and the United States. In those two former cases, censorship was institutionalized by bodies with little or no legal or legislative powers to enforce or regulate them.³⁰⁴

Early censorship legislation in Singapore also impacted the Thai film market, as Singapore was the major hub through which films were imported into Thailand prior to World War II. In fact, Britain instituted one of the earliest colonial film censorship systems in the Straits Settlements, with ordinances introduced in 1908, 1912, and 1917 that created a strict system of

³⁰² NA นต 84/10.

³⁰³ NA นต 84/10.

³⁰⁴ David Newman, “British Colonial Censorship Regimes: Hong Kong, Straits Settlements, and Shanghai International Settlement, 1916-1941.,” in *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship around the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 168.

regulation and enforcement over film distribution and production.³⁰⁵ Newman described the guidelines regulating film content as including “restrictions on scenes showing a variety of criminal activities such as hold-ups, safe-breaking, and murder, as well as dignity-related scenes such those where “women do not conduct themselves in a proper manner,” scenes showing Europeans under the power of natives or being persecuted in some way, or scenes likely to provoke racial or religious animosity.”³⁰⁶ But at that stage, the vast majority of films were banned for inclusion of violence and crime.³⁰⁷

Much as with the colonial territories of Asia, Thai state authorities, rather than institutions related to the film industry, determined and enforced the policy and practice of censorship. Violation of these rules could result in punitive action or fines. The formulation of the Film Act was indicative of the layered hierarchies of power in operation during the period in which the Act was conceived. The influence of Western imperial censorship models reflected the desire of Siamese elites to assert the nation as thoroughly modernizing and civilized, often according to notions imported from and, at times, imposed by the West.

The double-censoring of foreign films and the use of colonial censorship frameworks, moreover, recalls Tamara Loos’ observation that Siam engaged in “competitive colonialism” with European powers as the leaders sought to define their own authority and territory in a climate of imperialism.³⁰⁸ The regulation of foreign films highlights competition, protection, and control over managing the psychologies, loyalties, and pleasures of the Siamese people. Related to this, Ann Stoler established the ways in which European colonial regimes in Southeast Asia

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 176.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 177. To my knowledge, the Thai censors never enforced or legislated any restrictions on racial intimacies. But that content would have been already-regulated in any foreign productions coming into Thailand.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 178.

³⁰⁸ Tamara Loos, “Competitive Colonialisms: Siam and the Malay Muslim South,” in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 76.

perceived the family and intimate practices as “sites in which state authority could be secured or irreparably undermined.”³⁰⁹ Similar forces may be observed in Thailand, where nationalist impulses asserted so-called “national” patterns of public expressions of intimacy in order to demarcate the borders of Thainess. Indeed, censorship of film increased at the same time that Thailand was rapidly opening to American consumer goods and cultural models, such as Hollywood films. Whereas Siamese elite polygyny was defended at the beginning of the twentieth century as a facet of Siamese culture, by the middle of the century the argument reversed to contrast Thai sexual morality with the Western sexual revolution.

From the 1920 onwards, Hollywood films dominated the Thai film market much as they did in the rest of the world. The market share of American films only increased after the end of World War II, as the US government and international business community actively promoted the cause of American abroad. In the 1960s and 1970s, the median percentage share of the market held by the US was close to 32%.³¹⁰ In Thailand, this coincided with the development of transport and communications infrastructure and, after 1950, the strengthening of the Thai-US alliance. Similar trends were apparent in Europe in the 1920-1950s, where governments’ fears of Europeans becoming “temporary citizens” of the US prompted protectionist attempts and the rise of “national” cinemas.³¹¹ In part because Thailand’s cinema industry developed more slowly, these tensions emerged only after the 1950s.

But anxieties over the models offered in American cinema also emerged with the massive infusion of US consumer goods and military personnel during the 1960s, as Thailand became an

³⁰⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 200.

³¹⁰ Based on the best available statistics, the market share in the 1960s and 1970s was as follows: United States 33.5%; Hong Kong and Taiwan 22.7%, Thailand 13%; Other 9.2%; India 6.8%; Japan 3.2%; United Kingdom 1.9%; and Italy 1.8%. Together, the US, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand made up approximately 69.2% of the market.

³¹¹ Victoria de Grazia, “Mass Culture and Sovereignty: The American Challenge to European Cinemas, 1920-1960,” *Journal of Modern History* 61 (March 1989): 53.

important bulwark against communism and major base of US operations during the Vietnam War. Indeed, Benedict Anderson termed the period from the 1950s to 1970s Thailand's "American Era," based on the pervasiveness of American political and cultural influence.³¹² The US worked closely with Thailand's government to promote an anti-communist, capitalist way of life. In that respect, Thailand's censorship guidelines and those of the US, namely the Production Code, sometimes called the Hays Code, enforced by the Hollywood studio system, worked together to enforce an anti-communist, consumer-friendly cinematic environment. With so much of Thailand's film imports coming from the United States, domestic American censorship very much impacted the types of films screened in Thailand.

This synergy was also true for the regulation of sexuality and morality in cinema. Under the Production Code Administration (PCA) of the US, films could not portray explicit sex scenes, interracial relations, or non-normative intimate relationships, including adultery, amongst a range of other restrictions. American film scholar Thomas Doherty has noted the general consensus that "Hollywood under the Code was variously, cumulatively, and intractably racist, patriarchal, misogynistic, homophobic, capitalistic, and colonialist" and upholding "bourgeois, heteronormative, American-centric values..."³¹³ Indeed, there was very little in the Thai censorship rules that were not already covered in American ones. While critiques and scholars of censorship in Thailand have generally viewed the operations of the censorship board as existing within nationally delineated boundaries, in fact the censorship process was a transnational one.

³¹² Anderson, "Introduction to In the Mirror," 82

³¹³ Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 340-341.

But through the 1960s, and especially after 1964, films increasingly flouted those rules.³¹⁴ European cinema in particular challenged the sexual normative structure that guided and was reinforced by the censors to construct politically and socially relevant storylines. French New Wave filmmakers used new film styles in editing and narrative structure to challenge both mainstream cinema and contemporary social and political issues. Jean-Luc Godard, for example, used an adulterous married couple trying to kill each other to critique bourgeois society in his iconic *Week-end* (1967). Within the United States, censorship codes were repeatedly struck down in favor of free speech protections, especially with the 1960s.³¹⁵ As in Europe, furthermore, sexuality and changing views in the US towards the role of sex in public contributed to changes in the regulation of film.³¹⁶ In recognition of this pervasive opposition, the code was finally replaced with a ratings system in 1968. For the first time, American films, as well as European films, presented Thai censors with starkly different depictions of morality and sexuality in society.

The only other site of film production and distribution that came close to competing with the United States was Hong Kong and Taiwan.³¹⁷ Most of the films came from or through Hong Kong, which implemented censorship laws very much in keeping with other British colonies (as well as via the British Board of Film Classification [BBFC]), with especially strict regulations

³¹⁴ Cracks in the system had begun early in the 1950s, although mostly with regard to censorship in specific states, as the First Amendment was increasingly used to protect film content. Laura Wittern-Keller, "All the Power of the Law: Governmental Film Censorship," in *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship around the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 27-28.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 28.

³¹⁶ Although, as Jon Lewis has shown, "morality" continued to be regulated in less direct forms, such as the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography long after the end of the PCA. Jon Lewis, "American Morality Is Not to Be Trifled With": Content Regulation in Hollywood after 1968," in *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship around the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 34-35. At no point do I contend that American or European cinemas were totally free from regulation or morality regimes, but rather that after the 1960s they took different paths in terms of both content and regulation. Moreover, the regulation of pornography has less of an impact on depictions of adultery than the broader, pre-1968 rules.

³¹⁷ While the majority of these imports would have been Chinese-language productions, they would also have been distribution channels for American and British films as well.

implement from the 1930s onwards.³¹⁸ Furthermore, film historian David Newman argued that, “whereas the BBFC had a more direct impact through the content and form of censorship in the different colonies and dominions, the PCA potentially had an indirect impact through the pre-production vetting of scripts in the United States, contributing to the decrease in the level of offensive scenes in films arriving in Asia.”³¹⁹ In any case, it appears that there were either very few or no cases in which films from Hong Kong or Taiwan were censored (for 1969-1970 see chart below).

While the importation and circulation of Chinese-language films is important, and still relatively unexplored in studies of the Thai film industry, the influence of Hollywood loomed largest in the minds of Thai officials and censors. Intriguingly, the very bureaucrats that worked in Thailand’s government to promote joint US-Thai interests also served on the censorship board, and in that capacity worked to censor American films from exhibition in Thailand. This was in part, as discussed, due to the changing environment of transnational film censorship, especially in the United States. But it also evidenced a deep ambiguity on the part of Thai bureaucrats, as well as the Thai population at large, with regard to the alliance with the United States and role of American culture in Thai society. That tension only increased with the 1970s. In the cinema industry, Thai filmmakers lobbied the government for protection of the domestic industry. Finally, in the 1977 the Thai government raised tariffs on foreign films, resulting in a four-year boycott, from 1977 to 1981, of the Thai market by Hollywood film distributors.

Ironically, at the same time that criticisms of the foreign films were increasing, the government began supporting the revival what would become the Miss Thailand beauty pageant. The pageant had its origins in the Miss Siam pageant, which ran from 1934 to 1940 and again

³¹⁸ Newman, “British Colonial Censorship,” 179-181.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 169. While Newman’s analysis applied to colonial censorship in the 1920s-1940s, key aspects, such as the influence of PCA censorship, would have been longer lasting.

from 1948 to 1955.³²⁰ That iteration was cancelled in 1955, in large part due to immoral behavior on the part of the participants.³²¹ While beauty contests were popular, they were also controversial for the way they displayed women's bodies in public. It was revived with the support of Field Marshal Praphat Charusethian, the minister of the interior, Thanom's deputy prime minister, and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army. When Miss Universe, Inc. visited Thailand in 1961, the same year that the first national development plan was put in place, the organization convinced the Vajiravudh College Beauty Queen Costume Contest to change its name to the Miss Thailand Pageant.³²²

However, it would need the government's permission to do so. Praphat supported the move, arguing that it would provide a model of proper feminine behavior. Specifically, "To honor Thai women Miss Thailand never does anything inappropriate. They are properly married and work properly. Beauty Queens with other names are sometimes misled to become minor wives. We must select someone who can guard her own name."³²³ Although the idea was to a large degree imported from abroad, therefore, the contest would serve to reinforce Thai femininity and, importantly, moral sexual and marital behaviors. Praphat's distinction between appropriate pageants like the Miss Thailand one and others was the women's future marital position. Miss Thailand participants would go on to be wives. Thus, even at a time of growing anti-Americanism, an American institution could nonetheless provide an opportunity to showcase Thainess. The pageants remained controversial, however, as many, including student activists, saw them as putting women on display for the pleasure of men. Very much like foreign

³²⁰ William Callahan, "The Ideology of Miss Thailand in National, Consumerist, and Transnational Space," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 23, no. 1 (1998): 36.

³²¹ Ibid, 39.

³²² Ibid, 43.

³²³ Ibid, 43.

films, therefore, pageants as public displays of femininity and the sexualized feminine body took on ambiguous and controversial meanings.

As with the pageants, film was increasingly subject to state intervention. While the laws regulating film determined the relationship between the censors and imagined audiences, the structure of Thailand's censorship board also faced legislative change. The censors themselves were typically highly ranked bureaucrats. The institutional and social background of the censors contributed significantly to their judgments. Although the earliest censorship boards were comprised mainly of royal and noble men, after the end of the absolute monarchy membership increasingly included bureaucrats and police officers.³²⁴ By 1958, a year after Sarit's coup, the list of bureaucratic representatives had expanded to include those from Public Relations, Religious Affairs, Public Health, and Foreign Affairs, amongst others.³²⁵

The two major changes to the board during the Sarit-Thanom years were the 1962 creation of the Censorship Representatives, and the 1972 transfer of the board to the Department of the Police. The two events bookended the intensification of censorship under the Sarit-Thanom governments. In 1962, the board was split into two sections, with the Censorship Representatives responsible for initial decisions and the Censorship Appeals Board for appeals.³²⁶ While the appeals board maintained its membership of elite bureaucrats and police officers, the representatives included a variety of bureaucrats, members of the film industry, journalists, and foreign language experts, amongst others who at a high point totaled a

³²⁴ When the board met to screen the film *Rasputin* (most likely the 1932 MGM film *Rasputin and the Empress*) in early 1933, the board included two royals of the *mom chao* rank, seven nobles (three *phraya*, two *phra*, and three *luang*), and one Police General (*phan tamruat ek*). It is remarkable to imagine those individuals evaluating a film regarding the fall of the absolute monarchy in Russia just half a year after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in Siam, when much was still in doubt and royalists hoped to restore the institution to its former power. Ultimately, the board decided to allow the film to show in theaters, provided the distributor first cut one particularly offensive scene. But it is hardly surprising that they considered banning it in the first place. The case not only illustrates the early composition of the board, but also how personal some of the interests were. [3]ศร0202.53/8, 4.

³²⁵ NA ศร0701.9.10.15

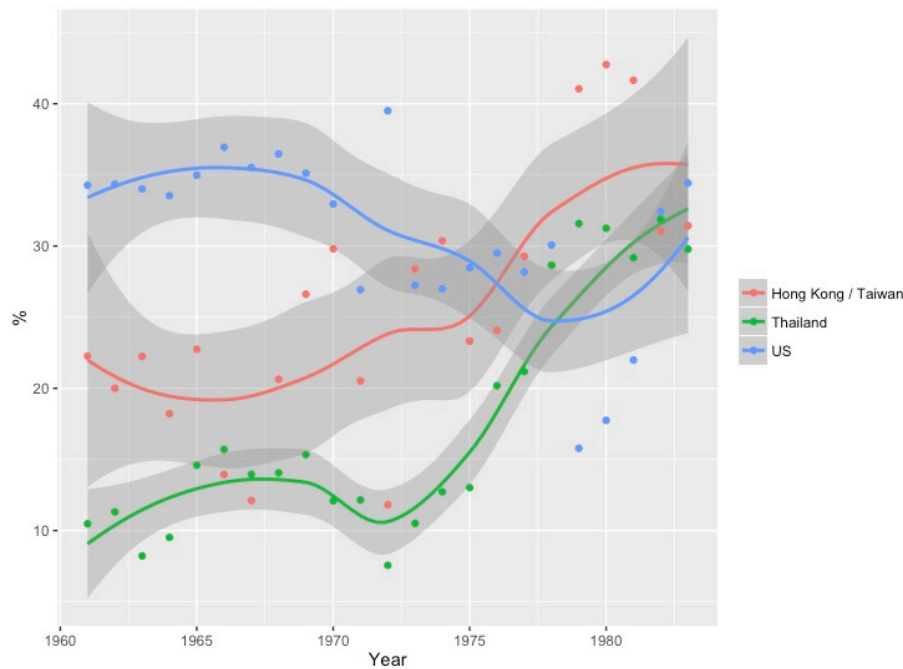
³²⁶ Sathian, "Thai Censors and Banned Films in Thailand," 27.

remarkable 177 individuals. If a film distributor wanted to show a film at a public theater, they were first required to submit the film for examination by the representatives. If the film did not pass, the distributor or filmmaker could request an appeal. The resulting decision by the appeals board was final.

It is very difficult to find complete data on film censorship during any period of Thailand's film history. The only systematic information available is on the number of films passed by the censorship, as Figure 1.1 shows between the years 1961 and 1979. This data has been used to support a number of arguments, most of which are questionable. Some of these will be discussed in subsequent chapters. To begin with, it is unclear if the data is based on the nationality of the film distribution companies or the nationality of the films themselves (although with co-productions, even that is problematic). This is particularly significant in the US category, as the censorship documents clearly show that US distribution companies imported significant numbers of non-American films into Thailand. It is also unclear what caused the gradual decline in US films passed between the years 1968 and 1971, followed by the jump in 1972. That momentary increase was then followed by another decline from 1973 until 1974. Indeed, looking at the numbers, it is clear that the number of US imports rose and fell in cycles. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish any patterns in terms of importation.

The statistics on films passed by the board fails to support arguments that the years between 1973 and 1976 saw less censorship and more freedoms (although they also are not complete enough to refute it). The numbers of films passed between 1973 and 1976 were on average lower than previous years, including during years of strict censorship. While that may have been attributable to a number of factors, including anti-American sentiments with the closing of the Vietnam conflict or market insecurity, it's also clear that there wasn't a dramatic

flourishing of cinematic freedom. The argument may be more valid for Thai films, which did see a rise in those years of about ten films per year. But again, that may be more evidence of increasing domestic production, rather than greater freedoms.



*Figure 3.1 Censorship of Films from Major Import Countries*³²⁷

It is quite clear that in the 1960s and early 1970s the government devoted great resources to censoring films. Just as the numbers of censors increased, so too did legislation regulating the content of films. The regulations were so extensive that, in 1968, Rat Pettanyi complained that, “The censors in Thailand are terrorizing the producers. If they persist in their present attitude it will involve a loss of several million baht for the Thai industry.”³²⁸ New restrictions banned inappropriate music (especially rock and roll) and any negative portrayals of state officials and

³²⁷ Data used is drawn from Patsorn Sungsi, *Thai National Cinema : The Three Potent Signifiers of Thai Identity, Nation, Religion, and Monarchy, Their Interrelationship and Influence in Thai National Cinema* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008).

³²⁸ Prachan Pimpan, “The Problems of the Film Industry in Thailand” (California State University, Northridge, 1975), 75.

institutions. By 1970, the list of items to be prohibited in films had nearly doubled.³²⁹ A 1971 law, meanwhile, cracked down on screenings of uncensored films in provinces outside Bangkok.³³⁰ Hollywood distributors also supported the regulation of up-country screenings, which they viewed as a black market for foreign productions.³³¹

Finally, in 1972 Thanom transferred the board to the Police Department. The order specifically referenced the problem of theaters screening films that “induce or promote the violation of morality.”³³² The Chief of Police was given the right to appoint all members of the Officials and the Appeals division. Subsequently, the representation of police increased in both bodies. The chief also had the right to cancel the application for public screening of any film. The police controlled the Censorship Board from 1972 until the reform of film censorship laws in 2007.

Even as the government refined its regulation of the film industry, in 1970 film advertisers began to use sexual imagery in film posters. This trend accompanied attempts by the film industry to attract larger audiences for domestic productions. The placement of sexualized depictions of female characters in advertisements proved particularly successful. Wimonrat termed the strategy “Films Selling Sex.”³³³ Even the female leads, whose characters portrayed morally upright sexual and gender norms, were sexualized in promotional materials and films.

After the October 14, 1973 popular uprising against the authoritarian government, filmmakers and advertisers increased their use of sex to sell films substantially.³³⁴ In some cases, the use of sex in films transformed from advertising strategies to, in some cases, serious

³²⁹ Sathian, “Thai Censors and Banned Films in Thailand,” 28-29.

³³⁰ Itthiphon Yindi, *Sensoe [Censor]* (Bangkok: Department of the Police, Division of Film Censorship, 1988), 52.

³³¹ NA นก 84/10.

³³² Itthiphon, *Sensoe*, 50.

³³³ Wimonrat Arunrotsuriya, “Erotic Films and Freedom after 14 October (Nang po kap seriphap lang 14 tula),” *Nang: Thai* 2, no. 8 (1999): 37.

³³⁴ *Ibid*, 42.

engagement with social and political issues.³³⁵ Prince Chatrichaloem's 1974 *Theptida rongraem* (Hotel Angel), a sympathetic portrayal of a prostitute, is an example of this.³³⁶ I will discuss Chatrichaloem's filmmaking further in chapter five. However, it is not possible to accurately assert the rise or decline of censorship after 1972 due to the inaccessibility and incompleteness of documents on censorship decisions during that period.

To a large extent, as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter five, the "social activist" films of the 1970s were inspired by the "Art for Life" movement popularized amongst leftist and progressive circles. But film censorship found support in those circles as well. As early as the 1950s, Jit Phumisak, under the pen name Sinlapa Prechacharoen, wrote that for the Phibun government, "the most urgent task of our film censorship committee at this time is to screen the ethnically disagreeable influences from the American imperialist films from poisoning the minds of our people any further."³³⁷ The statement, while not about sex or sexuality per se, indicates that both anti-Americanism and arguments for censorship was, for different reasons, shared by both conservative and radical elements.

The question of obscenity, and what qualified as obscene, was also debated in 1950s Marxist and progressive literary circles, specifically in the Writers Club.³³⁸ These discussions included such "classic" works as *Khun chang khun phaen*, which included multiple sex scenes and an adulterous love triangle between the three lead protagonists, one female and two male. One of the formative writers of the Literature for Life movement, Atsani Phonlathan, not only viewed many classics of Thai literature to be feudalistic works of obscenity intended to

³³⁵ Sudarat Musikawong, "Sex and Politics of Censorship in the 1970s" (The 10th International Conference on Thai Studies, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand, 2008), 9.; Wimonrat Arunrotsuriya, "Films and Freedom," 40.

³³⁶ Prince Chatri Chaloem Yukhon, *Theptida Rongraem (Hotel Angel)* (Mangpong, 1974).

³³⁷ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, "Political Economy," 191.

³³⁸ Thanaphol Limaphichart, "The Prescription of Good Books: The Formation of the Discourse and Cultural Authority of Literature in Modern Thailand (1860s-1950s)" (University of Wisconsin- Madison, 2008), 52. The writers disagreed on what constituted obscenity and how it might artfully be portrayed.

indoctrinate the people, but also evidence of the privileging of content over form.³³⁹ While these debates related to obscenity and pornography broadly, they seem to indicate a rejection by both government representatives and influential progressive groups of sexuality as a form of legitimate artistic or political expression. They also show a willingness on all sides to support some form of censorship.

Regardless, censors continued to regulate depictions of sex in films and advertising. All depictions of sex scandals or inappropriate sexual behavior by officials or police continued to be taboo. The 1967 American film *Carmen Baby* was banned in 1974 for depicting a police officer involved with a prostitute.³⁴⁰ Authorities specifically targeted film promotion in a 1976 regulation prohibiting pornography (broadly defined) from use in public advertisements. A policy adopted in September 1976 sought to monitor language used by live film narrators. As May Adadol Ingawanij has discussed, film narrators, called *nak phak*, narrated films live (instead of using the original soundtrack), often with original scripts and improvisation.³⁴¹ However, by the 1970s they were scorned by middle class audiences and increasingly isolated in a rapidly changing film industry. In an interview with *Thai Rat* in November 1976, Major General Praman Adireksan, then the deputy prime minister, reported that efforts to increase regulation of content in films were aimed at films that presented a “danger” to youths and those that “violated Thai culture.”³⁴² After the 1976 military coup, the police department replaced the guidelines established under the Ministry of the Interior with four prohibited categories, including those films encouraging sexual abuse, depictions of cruelty against humans and animals, presenting

³³⁹ Ibid, 53.

³⁴⁰ Sudarat Musikawong, “Mediating Memories of the 1970s in Thai Cultural Production” (PhD, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006), 161.

³⁴¹ May Adadol Ingawanij, “Mother India in Six Voices: Melodrama, Voice Performance and Indian Films in Siam,” *BioScope* 3, no. 2 (2012): 100-101.

³⁴² Wimonrat, “Films and Freedom,” 40.

political issues (domestic and international), and violating “established moral, cultural, and social values.”³⁴³

The new regulations in turn resulted in less willingness by Thai filmmakers and distributors to rely on sex as a tool to promote and sell films, leading to a major decline in the “Films Selling Sex” trend.³⁴⁴ Thus, the intensification of censorship from 1962 to 1972 created new tensions between the film industry and the Thai state. The resulting struggle between the film industry and the state highlighted sexuality as an important site of debate over social hierarchies, nationally bounded notions of tradition, and Thailand’s engagement with modernity. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, these forces had reached a critical point.

On 9 November 1971, the Censor Representatives decided to ban *The Todd Killings*, a Warner Bros. film about an older man who seduces and murders teenage girls. In their decision, the Representatives wrote,

This film depicts a lifestyle of young American men and women in which they seek happiness through illegal methods, including drugs and the use of drugs to arouse illicit sexual feelings, that violate the beautiful morality and culture of the Thai. Examples include closeness between youths of different sexes; joking between sexes that goes so far as to take their clothing off in each others’ company for fun and results in pornographic imagery; depiction of relationships between the sexes that arouses sexual feelings, etc. In addition, [the film] normalizes the mass murder of women by a mentally ill man, thus reflecting an image of society that is not concerned about mass murder. This depiction is bad for Thai youths and should therefore not be spread. We find that the film is violates the morality-culture (*sinlatham-wathanatham*) and peace (*khvam sangop*) of the country.”³⁴⁵

The language used derived from the official guidelines, especially “morality” (*sinlatham*) and “peace” (*khvam sangop*). The justification of “peace” was typically invoked to justify censorship of political or criminal issues. Films containing that type of content were accused of

³⁴³ Sakdina, “Direction Unknown,” 60.

³⁴⁴ Wimonrat, “Films and Freedom,” 43.

³⁴⁵ NA ๙๕ 0701.9.10.15.

violating the “peacefulness” of Thailand. The violation of “morality,” by contrast, was deployed to justify censorship of films with inappropriate sexual context.

The language used originated specifically from the opening statement of the 1931 guidelines that declared that, “It is forbidden to make or show or exhibit motion pictures or announcements having characteristics that violate peace and order or good morality.”³⁴⁶ Censors “must examine whether or not the content will cause wickedness (*khwam chua rai*) towards government administration and the people everywhere and damage morality or not.” The exact meaning and application of the terms “morality” and “wickedness” lacked specificity or definition. Ultimately, the censors had the power to apply the guidelines as they saw fit. But, as shown in the history of censorship, the guidelines asserted a discursive and institutional framework that dictated a focus on the ambiguous concept of “morality.” As anxieties over public depictions of adultery demonstrate, those institutional and individual motivations intertwined in conflicting and productive ways.

In their deliberations on the morality of films, the censors constantly referenced the need to think about how audiences would consume and react to the films. In their 1970 decision to ban the erotic ninja film *Shinobi No Manji* (1968), for example, the Board of Censor Officials found that the sexual depictions in the film presented a “danger” to juveniles. The 1969 Swiss film *The Doctor Says* was banned for its inclusion of abortion. Officials wrote that while the film may serve an educational purpose for adults, it was not appropriate for juveniles with “insufficient knowledge” (of what they did not specify) and who might imitate the behaviors seen in the film.³⁴⁷ These judgments evidence the censors’ paternalistic concerns that audiences would view films as models for behavior and imitation, not simply entertainment products. In the fight over

³⁴⁶ NA กต 84/10.

³⁴⁷ NA ศส0701.9.10.15.

which cultural models Thai audiences would have access to, these tensions became most notable in the question of morality.

The modern Thai state was very much concerned with the “morality” of its citizenry. The idea of morality is usually expressed with the word *sinlatham*. Although the word framed the censors’ decisions, it was never explicitly defined. Scholars of Thailand have noted the role of concepts such as civility (*siwilai*), Thainess (*khwampenthai*), and culture (*watthanatham*) in modern Thai constructions of nation and identity.³⁴⁸ But morality has been only implicit as an historical framing concept. In the modern period, the idea of Buddhist morality more broadly is relevant for political framings of legitimacy and the ways in which elected governments have been delegitimated and coups justified. In his discussion of the development of hyper-royalism since the 1970s, Thongchai observed the class-based notions of “good people,” which deployed dharma-based notions of merit to argue that goodness and righteousness was developed over time.³⁴⁹

While these notions emerged as part of the sacralization of the monarchy under King Bhumibol, they have also had an impact on the idea of morality of political discourse more generally.³⁵⁰ Aim Sinpeng found that discourses on the corruption of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s government leading up to the 2006 military coup, especially as expressed by the urban, middle-class, and ultra-royalist coalition People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD),

³⁴⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, “Siwilai”; Saichon Sattayanurak, *Changes in the Construction of the “Thai Nation” and “Thainess” according to Luang Wichitwathakan (Khwampianplaeng Nai kansang “Chat Thai” lae “khwampen Thai” doi Luang Wichitwathakan)* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2002); Scot Barme, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Thanaphol Limaphichart, “The Prescription of Good Books.”

³⁴⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, “Toppling Democracy,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 11–37. Dharma and merit are often deployed in various contexts to justify the class and gender status quo, with birth as an upper-class male used as evidence of past good deeds.

³⁵⁰ The language used does not always invoke the word *sintham*, but usually a word based on the word *tham* or *thamma*. For example, in describing the formation of the word *thammarat* to mean “good governance,” Kasian Tejapira described the meaning of *thamma* thus: “In Thai Buddhism, “*thamma*” denotes (1) nature as it is; (2) the law governing that nature; and (3) the obligation of human beings to conform to the law of nature.”

“centered around three main issues: (i) state capture; (ii) morality (Buddhist); and (iii) nationalism/royalism.”³⁵¹ In terms of electoral politics, this discourse and notions of merit were used to imply that “the majority (and supposedly less educated) Thais were incapable of identifying a good person.”³⁵² What these contemporary views establish is that the deployment of morality of social and political discourses is deeply class-based. Contemporary forms are imbedded in in historical processes since the Cold War period.

Censors frequently appealed to notions of morality, at times in combination with culture as with the hyphenated morality-culture in *The Todd Killings* decision. They used morality not as a universal ideal, but rather as a concept specific to the Thai nation, as in the “good and beautiful morality of Thais.” A nationally specific version of morality was used to censor the depiction of foreign behaviors in foreign films. Thus, the regulation of morality in cinema became a simultaneous process of protecting Thai morality from foreign influences and of constructing a specific morality for Thai citizens.

Thanaphol has shown that modern understandings of pornography and sexual indecency were formed from the early- to mid-twentieth century. He observed that from 1917 to 1947 politicians, artists, and journalists engaged in public debates on the subject.³⁵³ While Thanaphon’s examination centered on literature, the formation of a discourse on indecency had an impact on all forms of public imagery and expression, including film. An important element for the censors in deciding whether or not an image or narrative was “indecent” was the extent to which it was understood as erotic. More specifically problematic were any depictions of female

³⁵¹ Aim Sinpeng, “Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014): 531.

³⁵² Ibid, 533.

³⁵³ Thanaphol Limaphichart, “‘Pornography’ ... What Does It Mean?: The Formation of the Concept and Debate about ‘Obscenity’ in Thai Society (From the 1910s to 1940s),” unpublished, 2.

eroticism. Rachel Harrison showed through her examination of eroticism in Thai literature that strong taboos exist with regard to any public discussion of female sexual desire.³⁵⁴

A comparison between the imagery allowed in newspapers and in film further illustrates this point. While nudity and sexual imagery was strictly controlled in films, provocative images of Thai women were commonplace in newspapers.³⁵⁵ One 1974 issue of *Thai Rat* led the cover with images of naked prostitutes, with only the tips of their nipples and genital areas covered by black boxes.³⁵⁶ That same imagery would certainly have been cut entirely from a film, or resulted in a film being banned. But that incident illustrates Samson Lim's observation of the dual purposes served by crime news stories, specifically that they were both entertaining and educational on "social transgressions and punishments."³⁵⁷ Those two functions were certainly evident in newspaper imagery used in reporting on prostitution. The naked female bodies acted as titillating evidence of the masculine power of the state.

The censors' concern with "inciting sexual desire" evidenced the importance of eroticism. In both Western and Thai films, women's bodies were used to empower male counterparts and to appeal to the male gaze. However, with the decline of the PCA in the US and sexual revolution in global cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, women in many Western films were portrayed enjoying sexual acts as autonomous individuals. Because cinematic sex acts and sexuality were displayed as pleasurable, film offered important depictions of female sexual agency in the public sphere. Censorship of Thai cinema was aimed at regulating pleasure and sexual enjoyment, not simply nudity. A woman committing adultery and enjoying it, as in *The*

³⁵⁴ Rachel Harrison, "'A Hundred Loves', 'A Thousand Lovers': Portrayals of Sexuality in the Work of Thidaa Bunnaak," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (October 2002): 456.

³⁵⁵ Samson W. Lim, "Murder! In Thailand's Vernacular Press," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (May 2014): 363.

³⁵⁶ Front Cover, *Thai Rat*, December 21, 1972, 1.

³⁵⁷ Lim, "Murder! In Thailand's Vernacular Press," 366.

Touch, was a radical act of female sexual pleasure at the expense not only of the male marital partner, but also of the state that officially sponsored the marriage.

Indeed, the mere inclusion of sex in films was not in itself cause for banning a film, as in the case of *Easy Rider* (1968). The censors demanded that the distributor cut offending scenes, including characters taking drugs, exposed female breasts, naked petting, and characters in bed together.³⁵⁸ The film's portrayals of violence and murder, by contrast, were not censored. It is striking that while legal sexual acts were censored, illegal acts of violence were not. Film censorship was not a matter of ensuring that films reflected the contemporary criminal code of Thailand, but rather the social and cultural normative structure as understood by the censors themselves.

Even just the act of cutting scenes was usually sufficient to interrupt the narrative of a film. As the Bangkok Post's Harry Rolnick observed,

Bangkok movies have rarely had much in common with movies anywhere else in the world. The reasons are simple enough: the West produces films appealing to the tastes, prejudices, vices, virtues and dramas of the 1970s, while audiences in Thailand prefer more conservative productions. Then, too, certain originally-decent films like "Woodstock" and "Get Carter" have been maimed beyond repair by the Board of Censors, a fact of life that will presumably increase of the next year.³⁵⁹

Even when the censors did not ban a film, Thai audiences experienced the film differently than audiences elsewhere in the world. Global cinema challenged the sexual normative structure that guided and was reinforced by the censors. Thai censorship of those acts was not just about preventing audiences from witnessing the affairs of illicit lovers. By removing scenes, the censors intervened in the very language of cinema and logic of films' narratives. They obscured the social and political power of sexual and intimate expressions. Through this

³⁵⁸ NA ๗๕ 0701.9.10.15.

³⁵⁹ Harry Rolnick, "Movies of the Year," *Bangkok Post*, January 1, 1972, 24. Rolnick predicted the increase in censorship based on the upcoming transfer of the board to the police.

process of removal, Thai censorship practices fundamentally impaired the role of film as a site of debate, contestation, and representative in the public sphere.

In contrast to the erasure of female pleasure, censorship was highly visible. The guidelines by which the censors operated and made decisions were well known. Newspapers commonly reported on censored and banned films. All films exhibited at theaters were required to show the stamp of approval by the censorship board in the opening moments. Reports of the activities of the censors and their decisions were commonplace in newspapers. Audiences would have been aware of censorship as they attended the cinema, particularly in cases of heavily cut films. The jumps that resulted from the cut celluloid must have been jarring. Everyone in the Thai film industry knew the broad topics that might result in censorship, but that there were no clear lines bounding them. The situation made domestic cinema owners and film producers extremely cautious, thereby inhibiting the originality and creativity of the Thai cinema scene.³⁶⁰

There was plenty of evidence to justify risk averse behavior. When the Board of Appeals met on 16 July 1970, the officials were faced with assessing a hat trick of banned adulterous content. *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) followed the affairs of three of the titular characters, and the ultimate consideration of partner swapping between the four. *The Reckoning* (1969) tells the story of wealthy Mick, who cheats on his cold-hearted wife with his dead father's nurse, a mother to two small children. Another film, *Loving* (1970), climaxes with the main character cheating on his wife at a work party in a children's playhouse, an act that is caught on security cameras.³⁶¹ The censors justified their decisions much as they did with others that depicted adultery. The films portrayed their characters committing adultery, *kan chu* or *chu sao*, or taking on lovers, *mi chu*. The same term, *chu*, likewise described the guilty parties that could mean

³⁶⁰ Sathian, "Thai Censors and Banned Films in Thailand," 31-33.

³⁶¹ NA ๙๕ 0701.9.10.15.

adultery, lover, or adulterer. In one instance, the censors used another term to signify adultery *luang praweni*, literally meaning to overstep or exceed sex. Sometimes, these villains were specified according to gender, as in *chu sao* (female adulterer) or *chu chai* (male adulterer). These people and their acts were labeled “promiscuous,” or *sam son*. They were guilty of violating Thai tradition (*phit prapheni*), morality (*khat tao sinlatham*), and occasionally even peace (*khwaam sangob*). Even more seriously, the films held the potential to incite sexual feelings or desire (*yuayu kamarom*) in Thai audiences, a result that board members considered essential to avoid.

Of all the films censored for adultery, the vast majority involved married women cheating on their spouses. In each case, the women were legally married, often with children. In their adulterous relations, the women violated their state-sanctioned marriages in pursuit of sexual pleasure with another person. With the rise of depictions of sexuality, sex, and nudity in Western films, the portrayals of adultery were less likely to rely on insinuation or ambiguity. The sex scenes involved would have made their sexual pleasure evident. The women often faced minimal consequences for their affairs. In 1965’s *Kiss Me Stupid*, the wife’s adultery was not punished, and actually helped her husband’s professional aspirations. Certainly, not all Western films portrayed female sexual pleasure, nor would the vast majority of films have been considered progressive for women’s equality or feminist causes. However, I argue that the portrayal of women explicitly enjoying sexual relations in non-marital contexts offered a controversial and non-normative model of sexual pleasure. Moreover, in a state actively engaged in redefining and standardizing definitions of marriage, those models were significant.

The censorship of female pleasure was contemporaneous with two major public debates in the 1960s and 1970s, first about prostitution and second about women’s rights. Prostitution

has a long history in Thailand, much as it does elsewhere in the world. In the contemporary period, moreover, domestic factors, including patronage and economic inequality, play the most significant role in the continuation of the industry. However, during the Cold War period, prostitution came to be associated with the American-backed developmental agenda and military bases stationed in Isan.³⁶² By one estimate the numbers of prostitutes expanded from approximately 20,000 to 171,000 between the late 1950s and 1964.³⁶³ Leslie Ann Jeffrey, a political historian of prostitution, observed that:

The symbolic importance of women, and women's sexual behaviors, in maintaining national culture and identity made the growing sex trade around American air force bases in the Northeast a central subject of social and political debate. At the same time, the Thai military and conservative bureaucrats worked to pacify the countryside and to inscribe a Thai identity, based on "Nation, Religion, and King," upon a rebellious peasantry. In the reconfigured politics of the post-democracy era, the peasant, too, became a symbol and an anchor of Thai culture. Peasant women, therefore, were doubly marked with national identity; and those who entered the growing prostitution industry were the source of a great deal of social anxiety in the following years.³⁶⁴

Prostitute, moreover, were clear reminders that women, like men, participated in work-related migration and the wage-earning economy. They were by no means necessarily the victims that images of the prostitute in popular criticisms portrayed.

The image of rural women participating in the capitalist economy by selling sex also functioned a clear rebuke, intended or not, of elite forms of feminine morality and sexual decency.³⁶⁵ In other words, the expansion of prostitution in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s was not simply a threat to Thailand's national culture because women were selling sex. It was threatening in part because the women could be seen as rejecting the official and elite discourse on proper feminine behavior. It revealed, domestically and internationally, that the Thai woman,

³⁶² Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders*, 29.

³⁶³ Ibid, 37.

³⁶⁴ Ibid, 30.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 31.

and by association Thai society, was not uniformly conservative, but rather could be conservative or sexually open according to context. In popular portrayals of prostitution, northeastern and northern Thai women were prominently featured, but their Thai male customer rarely made an appearance.³⁶⁶ Instead, it was the American GI who formed the prostitute's counterpart. Despite the reality of active participation in the prostitution industry by Thai men, prostitution became a particularly Thai female contribution to national cultural decline.

The prostitute as part of a cultural decline was supported by official and elite condemnations of the industry. The Thai government officially responded to concerns by formally outlawing prostitution with the 1960 Prostitution Prohibition Act. However, the impact of the law was mitigated in 1966, when the entertainment Places Act created the legal category of "special service girls," which allowed policemen ignore prostitution disguised as entertainment.³⁶⁷ The combination of laws formally condemned the practice, while creating sufficient loopholes to allow it to continue. Meanwhile, elite women's organizations likewise condemned the expansion of prostitution. For example, students' organizations portrayed prostitutes as "fallen" women.³⁶⁸ The popular *luk thung* folk music likewise asserted similar themes of prostitution as connected with foreign patronage, moral decline, and the problems of development.³⁶⁹ While Thai women became the victims, Americans became the aggressors. Nationalist organizations from both the left and the right attacked American intervention for its immoral impact on traditional Thai culture and values.³⁷⁰ In each case, Jeffrey argues that

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 41.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, 38.

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 41.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, 42.

³⁷⁰ Ibid, 43.

prostitutes were spoken for, but never given the opportunity to express their own thoughts or experiences.³⁷¹

In some cases, particularly amongst student and women's groups, concerns over prostitution intersected with growing attention to women's rights. The movement to progress women's rights reached a high point with the 1974 constitution. Passed in the aftermath of the 1973 mass protests, it is generally viewed as one of the most liberal of Thailand's many constitutions.³⁷² It included a guarantee of equal rights for men and women. Explicit equal rights were one goal in the larger effort to reform laws that were discriminatory and exclusionary to women. The movement was primarily led by groups of elite women, intelligentsia, and labor activists. Despite differing interests and motivations, the women were part of a growing movement advocating for changes in a range of issues, including family law, property rights, political representation, and labor rights.

Writing in 1997, Sanitsuda Ekachai described the gendered understandings of infidelity that persisted in Thai family law, writing that

The Thai language is rich with expressions of men's unfaithfulness. Men can stray or *nok jai*. They can have "another woman" or [*mi phuying*] *uen*. They can have a mistress or [*mi*] *mianoi*. But they can never, never [*mi chu*], or commit adultery, because, linguistically, this expression is used only when a married woman has an extramarital affair.³⁷³

³⁷¹ Ibid, 48.

³⁷² Virada Somsawasdi, "Women in the Constitution of Thailand: A Far-Fetched Hope for Equality," in *Women's Legal Position in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: The Women's Studies Program, Chiang Mai University, 1991), 8.

³⁷³ Sanitsuda Ekachai, "Adultery Is for Women Only," *Women's Studies Center 2* (2002): 79.

Within the women's movement, the Women Lawyers' Association of Thailand, formed under Khunying Suphatra Singholaka in 1948, were particularly influential.³⁷⁴ The group of largely elite women focused on family law. In 1970, the Association submitted a proposal for the amendment of the Commercial Code in the areas of marriage registration, requirements for a husband's consent before a wife could take up an occupation, marital assets, grounds for divorce, and alimony.³⁷⁵ All these issues pivoted on the definitions of marriage and adultery. Contesting the juridical framing of adultery was central to the movement for women's rights in Thailand. This point emphasizes the mobilization of contradictory political agendas around the subject of adultery in a broader contestation of political control and women's

The guarantee of equal rights was supposed to result in a dramatic revision of Thai laws to be less discriminatory towards women. This included the problematic law related to divorce on grounds of adultery, which stated that, "If the wife has committed adultery, the husband may enter a claim for divorce." That gendered reading of adultery was a legacy of polygyny, which had been practiced by Siamese elite and many officials until the 1935 civil code restricted individuals to one registered marriage. However, polygyny was neither criminalized, nor was the law well implemented. Furthermore, male extra-marital sex alone did not constitute adultery. As the 1950 dictionary of the Royal Institute described adultery, "A man who has sex with (another man's) wife is called a lover (*pen chu*, literally being a lover), a woman that has a husband (*sami*) already, who has sex with another man is called an adulterer (*mi chu*, literally having a lover)."³⁷⁶

The definition of adultery had serious legal implications. It prevented women from divorcing their husbands on the basis of adultery, even if their husbands engaged in extra-marital

³⁷⁴ Kazuki Iwanaga, *Women in Politics in Thailand* (Lund: Lund University, 2005), 55.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 66.; Virada, "Women in the Constitution," 8.

³⁷⁶ The Royal Institute, *The Dictionary of the Royal Institute* (Bangkok: The Royal Institute, 1950), 342.

affairs. If a woman did leave an unfaithful husband, she would remain legally wed to him and unable to gain financial independence or remarry. She would also not be guaranteed custody of her children. Meanwhile, the continued registration of multiple marriages by men resulted in legal disputes regarding property and inheritance in cases of the death of the man.³⁷⁷ The issues of multiple marriages, adultery, and resulting property disputes were thrown in the national spotlight rather spectacularly with the 1964 legal dispute between the last wife of Sarit Thanarat, who had died the previous year, and his seven children from previous marriages. While he was not married to the women at the same time, Sarit had children by multiple women. The difficulty his offspring from previous marriages encountered in collecting their inheritance reveals the challenges presented in contemporary family law. Sarit's affairs were made all the more scandalous by revelations that his estate was estimated at some \$140 million Baht and that he had kept dozens of mistresses. Despite his obvious philandering and engagement in corruption, it was Sarit's last wife, Thanphuying Wichitra, and not Sarit himself who emerged as the villain in popular reports.³⁷⁸

The 1974 constitution was short-lived. The October 6, 1976 military coup rendered it void. The new version removed language specifically guaranteeing equal rights for women. Meanwhile, the new 1976 Civil and Commercial Code changed the language regarding divorce to state that, "If a husband financially supports or recognizes another woman as his wife, or if a wife commits adultery (*mi chu*), the partner can use this grounds for divorce." This change in the pertinence of adultery to divorce cases conflated two similar, but different issues. The definition of female adultery continued to be very broad and contingent on sexual acts. Men were still not legally guilty of adultery through extramarital sex alone. Men were only capable, legally and

³⁷⁷ Virada, "Women in the Constitution," 8.

³⁷⁸ Thak, *Despotic Paternalism*, 223.

discursively, of adultery if they committed polygyny, or financially supported another wife. Male extra-marital sex remained legally invisible.

The centrality of property inheritance issues revealed the prominence of elite interests in debates on marriage and divorce law. Control of property and wealth formed a major reason for elite men to oppose reform. This was made evident when in 1955 Khun Orapin Chaiyakan, the first woman to be elected to the Thai Parliament, proposed amendments to the Civil and Commercial Code in the area of family law. The bill would have given women control over joint property and the right to divorce husbands if they lived with and paid expenses for another woman. Commenting on the opposition, the *Siam Rath Weekly Review* concluded that they “opposed the Bill for political reasons or in political interests more than in the interests of the country and the people.”³⁷⁹ For the same reasons elite men held vested interests in the laws, elite women were the majority amongst those advocating change. The 1976 legal reform addressed aspects of those class interests, but not of gender.

The class-based nature of the issue of adultery impacted film censorship, since the censors themselves were drawn from a social class of men likely to maintain mistresses. The tendency for senior officials to keep mistresses was an ongoing source of newspaper scandal and Bangkok gossip. One colorful description of the issue in *Chao Daily* reported that

These so-called “social girls” are dragging down Government officials of all ranks and positions by alluring them with their charms, thus being directly responsible for embezzlement of state funds, which is money provided in the form of taxation by the people. It is generally known that the majority of present-day officials have bad women as their secret wives, but the style in which these women are kept depends on the rank and position of the official.³⁸⁰

That men drawn from the same group of officials were also responsible for censoring images of adultery on cinema screens suggests an intriguing power dynamic intrinsic to cinematic

³⁷⁹ *Siam Rath Weekly Review*, December 15, 1955.

³⁸⁰ *Chao Daily*, June 5, 1955.

regulation.

My analysis of the censorship of adultery in film challenges key aspects of the literature on the Thai regime of images. Scholars argue that the Thai state is primarily concerned with regulating actions and discourse in the public sphere, but leaves the private sphere relatively autonomous.³⁸¹ Discussing public portrayals of monogamy, Jackson wrote that “the dual character of the regime of images is institutionalized in a split between those aspects of Thai law that govern the construction of images of public propriety (legal monogamy) and other aspects that govern actual cultural practice (the commonness of polygyny).”³⁸² This stance shares similarities with attempts to define a public/private segregation in areas outside Thailand.

However, Lauren Berlant offered a powerful feminist critique of how public and private constructions of sexuality and sex acts operates to empower heterosexual culture.³⁸³ As Berlant so aptly wrote, “Intimate life is the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood.”³⁸⁴ The censors repeated references to audiences parroting behaviors in films suggests concerns with private behavior, and the intersection of the supposedly separate spheres of private and public life. The censors clearly and repeatedly justified banning films on the basis that they would influence private behavior. Moreover, censorship of foreign films intended for Thai audiences also contradicts Jackson’s argument that the Thai state cared less about material

³⁸¹ Rosalind C. Morris, “Three Sexes and Four Sexualities: Redressing the Discourses on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Thailand,” *Positions* 2, no. 1 (March 20, 1994): 15–43, doi:10.1215/10679847-2-1-15; Peter A. Jackson, “The Thai Regime of Images,” *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 19, no. 2 (2004): 181–218.

³⁸² Jackson, “Regime of Images,” 196.

³⁸³ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 553.

intended for “Thai eyes.” The censors cared not just about how “Thailand” was portrayed to Westerners, but also how the “West” was portrayed to Thais.

Furthermore, while adultery was expunged from cinema, officials’ extramarital dalliances were widely discussed in newspapers. Officials may have wished to control the circulation of images and stories in the public, the press and popular opinion thought otherwise. The differences between official control of cinema, when contrasted with the press, emphasizes the uniqueness of film regulation, as the high costs of filmmaking and film studios made it particularly vulnerable to government intervention.

Certainly the censorship of adultery in films restricted public discourse on the issue. However, the background of the censors and contemporaneous debate on adultery in family suggests a deeper personal conflict of interest. Important power dynamics were imbedded in the regulation of adultery specifically, and sexual morality generally. Censorship was far from a mere face-saving device to avoid embarrassment at the mention of “private” affairs. It contributed to the perpetuation of a class and gender-exclusionary status quo. The relegation of certain matters to the “private” sphere largely serviced specific interests.

Indeed, adultery could at times be represented appropriately. The differences between the acclaimed film *The Adulterer* and the banned film *The Touch* reveal the tensions between the moral framework of Thai bourgeois society and that of many Western films. The space in which this friction occurred may be understood through the censors’ use of violation, as in *phit sinlatham*, and concepts of social and moral appropriateness. The concept is an important way to frame the ambiguities and apparent contradictions in censorship practices, as well as the complex layers of self-censorship and censorship that track a film from its production and censorship in a

foreign country, export and import to Thailand, passage through censorship in Thailand itself, and, in some cases, sale for exhibition and consumption.

As we saw with the film, *The Touch*, foreign films were more likely to violate Thai notions of appropriateness and morality because they were not produced in the socio-political context that informed domestic productions. Knowledge of censorship practices resulted in widespread self-censorship in Thai filmmaking, but also informed filmmakers' approaches to sensitive subjects when they were broached. While a foreign film might be banned, a Thai film depicting the same subject might pass by the censors due to the filmmaker's understanding of how it might appropriately be portrayed and contextualized. By comparing banned productions with successful domestic films, the dynamics of local self-censorship are made clearer. Likewise, it is possible to understand the nuances in censors' decisions to ban foreign films.

The content of the films and the agendas of the filmmakers contributed to the different rulings. The representation of sexual relations between the film's characters was particularly notable. In *The Adulterer*, the characters used informal terms for husband and wife, *phua* and *mia* respectively. Those slang terms are often used colloquially in Thai to refer to a sexual partner, in contrast to the formal *sami* and *phanraya* that indicate legal husbands and wives. While Riam slept with both Choeng and Thep, neither relationship was formalized with a public marriage ceremony. Use of informal terms recalled pre-twentieth century understandings in Siamese society that sexual relations constituted some form of marital arrangement. It was also informed by contemporary class-based language. As linguist Amara Prasithrathsint pointed out, *phua* and *mia* "are considered vulgar if used among the educated and in formal situations.... the terms [*phua*] and [*mia*] have negative connotations of something illegal, sexual, dirty, and

sinful.”³⁸⁵ Informal union by sex was emphasized in Riam’s final assertion that it is Choeng, not Thep, who is her lover. By contrast, the adultery in *The Touch* occurred against the boundaries of formal, state-sanctioned marriage.

Karin’s adultery was not, as with Riam, contextualized with competing claims to marital and sexual authority, but instead was motivated by a range of possible explanations from boredom to sexual desire to love. While Riam was raped into her sexual affairs, Karin willingly engaged in sex with two men and usually enjoyed it. One might imagine the censors discomfort at the ambiguities offered by Bergman in *The Touch*. The lack of any clear moral lesson in that film contrasted with *The Adulterer*, where Riam and Thep died as a clear consequence of their decisions. While *The Adulterer* may have approached issues that were typically contentious for Thai censors, it did so by operating within the moral universe of modern Thai bourgeois values. *The Touch*, on the other hand, was produced entirely apart from the context that informed censors’ understandings of what constituted sexual authority, marriage, and adultery. The censors were unable to rehabilitate the film through cutting, so they banned the film from the country.

These films inhabited the interstices of the commercialization of global cultural exchange between Thailand and the world. By analyzing that space, Thailand’s experience of the Cold War period becomes less of an “American Era,” but instead one characterized by ambivalence and negotiation. Furthermore, the censorship of adultery highlights the personalized nature of the regulation of cultural expression and the public sphere. The censors may have justified their decisions as protecting “Thai culture,” but those decisions also protected the gendered power dynamics of elite and middle-class Thai society. The social nature of censorship of important

³⁸⁵ Amara Prasithrathsint, “A Componential Analysis of Kinship Terms in Thai,” in *Essays in Tai Linguistics*, ed. M.R. Kalaya Tingsabadh and Arthur S. Abramson (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2001), 270.

cultural industries highlights the contingencies of Thai history during an important period of changing social dynamics and globalization.

However, to say that the films provoked the censors' anxieties is not to say that the films were not fascinating to the censors nonetheless. In fact, it appears that the films most likely to be subjected to the censors gaze were the ones considered most entertaining. The Ministry of the Interior raised this subject in early 1970 in a memorandum sent to all of the departments and ministries that normally provided censorship representatives, asking for new appointees. The request was unusual, however, as it highlighted some recent difficulties facing the board:

[These representatives] have served on the board since 1962 with the purpose to have multiple representatives help each other with the scrutiny of films, including those films on any topic or set in any time that violate the peace or good morality of the people, as well as those that incite sexual feeling should also be banned or cut according to official policy.

It appears that, at the present, representatives from some government agencies that received an appointment as a censor do not regularly attend meetings according to official policy. Thus there is news from the newspapers and public critics regarding some stories or instances where some films were inappropriately released for public viewing. Aside from this, some official representatives like to go to screenings only for entertaining films. Any film that they are not interested in will not have representatives attend.³⁸⁶

It is clear from the memo that the failure of censorship representatives to attend meetings consistently was resulting in a worrying number of "inappropriate" films passing the board. Even as the censorship officials participated in the regulation of film and construction of a moral regime over the industry, they clearly preferred to reap the benefits of the position (enjoying illicit foreign films) and avoid the drudgery.

One might imagine the censors' pleasure at films that simultaneously caused them enough anxiety to censor. Or perhaps, if a film's description seemed too boring, the resulting low attendance may have given the film a better chance at passing. It is intriguing to think, then, that

³⁸⁶ NA ๙๕ 0701.9.10.15.

the most compelling or entertaining films were also the most widely viewed and scrutinized by the censors. Perhaps the censors knew that, just as the storylines had intrigued them, Thai audiences might also flock to see the immoral films. This conception of the censors as individuals and the ways that they engaged with films disrupts the idea that they were merely passive enforcers of Thai moral standards intent on destroying the artistic integrity of the domestic cinema scene.

The Board of Film Censors was primarily interested in film as it acted as a medium of communication, or a conduit through which social and moral behaviors were expressed or propagated. They weren't merely regulating films, but rather the gaze of Thai cinema audiences and their ability to engage with a diversity of ideas and cultures in public. Extensive regulation of sexual morality in films, especially through formal censorship of foreign films, provides evidence of the censor's concern with depictions of sexuality in the public sphere. However, as I have established, inclusions of sex were not by themselves necessarily problematic, nor should we consider sexual displays revolutionary by default. It was only when those depictions violated middle class, bureaucratic social and cultural normative structures that films were banned. Depictions of adultery proved a major violation of those norms.

This particular concern is notable, considering that adultery amongst the official class was an ongoing source of popular scandal. It was also a major component in the middle class and elite women's fight for legal guarantees of equality, given the impact of family law on women's ability to control wealth and property and to obtain a divorce. Regulating public portrayals of adultery worked to simultaneously maintain the veneer of middle class sexual propriety, at the same time that it removed discussions of the issue from the public sphere. Regulation of

sexuality was not simply about policing surface appearance, but was deeply tied to operations of power in Thai society.

Social analysis of film censorship provides an important perspective on how authoritarian state regulation of cultural policies and morality impacted social development during the “American Era” from the 1950s to the 1970s. Far from evidencing a unidirectional trajectory towards modernity and equality, analysis of the development of the Thai middle class and women’s rights movement in the context of cultural regulation reveals important power struggles in the midst of rapidly changing economic, political, and social realities.

CHAPTER 4

HOTEL HELL: RAT PETTANYI AND THE CREATION OF A NATIONAL FILM INDUSTRY

On August 17, 1970 the well-regarded filmmaker Rat Pettanyi, now considered the “father” of contemporary Thai film, was scheduled to give a speech to members of the film industry and government representatives at the Montien Hotel in Bangkok as part of a discussion of government support for the domestic film industry.³⁸⁷ Following the economic restructuring from 1958 to 1962, the Thai government had sought to promote specific domestic industries in line with suggestions from the World Bank’s 1957-1958 assessment of Thailand. As part of this program, Rat and the Thai Motion Picture Producers Association had appealed, thus far unsuccessfully, for government protection of the growing domestic film industry. Only a few sentences into his speech, however, Rat faltered and collapsed on the floor.³⁸⁸ Hours later, he was declared dead due to coronary failure. Within days of this traumatic event, the Thai government agreed to support the industry and established the Thai Film Promotion Board.

Only two months after the death of Rat Pettanyi, Thai cinema saw another death that would have major consequences for the industry. While filming a stunt for the film *Insee Thong*, popular Thai actor Mitr Chaibancha fell from a helicopter to his death. Mitr was overwhelmingly considered to be the most popular star of the time and the main draw for audiences who went to see Thai films.³⁸⁹ Together, these two deaths brought about a third demise – that of the sixteen millimeter film era in Thai domestic film production. Sixteen millimeter film was developed in

³⁸⁷ Rachel Harrison, “Amazing Thai Film: The Rise and Rise of Contemporary Thai Cinema on the International Screen,” *Asian Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2005): 323.

³⁸⁸ Anchalee Chaiworaporn, “The Man Who Died for His Art,” *ThaiCinema.org*, accessed August 21, 2016, http://www.thaicinema.org/Essays_05The-Man-Who-Died.php.

³⁸⁹ Rachel Harrison, “Mitr Chaibancha, Tamnan ‘Dara’ Nang Thai (Mitr Chaibancha, the Legendary Star of Thai Cinema),” *Nang: Thai* 3, no. 9 (2001): 58.

the 1920s as a cheaper alternative to the more advanced thirty-five millimeter, and became popular with domestic Thai filmmakers after the Second World War. However, sixteen millimeter was associated with amateur filmmaking. As Hollywood films became dominant in the Thai market, comparisons between the technological sophistication of the two industries and perceptions of industrial progress encouraged filmmakers like Rat Pettanyi to use thirty-five millimeter film. The establishment of the Thai Film Promotion board, which included a clause to support only film studios using thirty-five millimeter, and the death of Mitr Chaibancha, whose star was seen to hold up the sixteen millimeter industry, thus heralded the end of an era in Thai film production.³⁹⁰

These two deaths underscore through their symbolism the significance of the transition in Thai filmmaking from sixteen to thirty-five millimeter. Academic and popular discussions of Thai film have depicted this change as precipitating the rise of the Thai film industry out of *nam nao*, or stagnant water. Originally used to describe the political atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, *nam nao* began to be applied to Thai films. The phrase *nang nam nao*, or stagnant water cinema, was formulated to refer specifically to domestic films that were seen to be technologically backward, shot in sixteen millimeter, and thought to appeal to rural and lower class Thai people.³⁹¹

An important element of this transition was the rise of discourse centered on “professionalism” with regard to official support of the domestic industry and filmmaking activities in the 1970s. I argue that with the end of the sixteen millimeter era and the advent of official government support for the industry, the discourse of professionalism and amateurism

³⁹⁰ Aliosha Herrera, “Thai 16mm Cinema; The Rise of a Popular Cinematic Culture in Thailand from 1945 to 1970,” *Rian Thai* 8 (2015): 48.

³⁹¹ Nithi Aoseewong, “The Depth of ‘Stagnant Water’ in Thai Cinema (Khwam Lam Luek Khong ‘nam Nam’ na Nang Thai),” in *Khon, Kharabao, Nam Nao Lae Nang Thai- Wa Duai Phlaeng Phasa Lae Nanamahorasop* (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995), 78–96.

created new boundaries for illegitimate and legitimate filmmaking. Because these concepts typically relied on markers including formal education in filmmaking, association with formal film studios, and the use of modern film technologies, the result was a class-based demarcation between those who could and could not afford to study abroad, form their own business, and buy the latest technological tools. Moreover, the new standards focused not on the popularity or commercial successes of films, but rather concepts such as artistry and the political and social awareness evident in the films' messages. In key respects, the concerns over professionalism, artistry, and the need to create authentically Thai, yet international standard films form the foundation of modern anxieties and debates over the contemporary industry.

The tension within the domestic industry and between domestic and international films was the result of the social, economic, and political context brought by Thailand's participation in Cold War discourses and development. Modernity (*than samai*), development (*phatthana*), and progress (*charoen*) were the watchwords of the day. They all signaled the need to move forward and catch up with the industrialized, capitalist countries. Moreover, as I have discussed, Thailand was developing in real terms, with more roads and infrastructure. The government, whether through the mobile team programs or in the five-year economic plans, was asserted its central role in modernizing the nation. This meant that at the same time that filmmakers expressed the need to institute progress in the film industry with the help of the government, the role of provincial markets became critical to domestic films' economic success. Thus, the state of the film industry became a marker not only of Thailand's modernity, but a site of class and geographic contestation for power.

Furthermore, the debates over reforming the industry were profoundly influenced by the nature of the United States' Cold War intervention and the significance of US cultural exports.

As I detailed in chapter two, cultural diplomacy and psychological warfare were a critical element of US policy in Thailand. Internationally, US consumer goods, including Hollywood films, were foundational to US soft power. However, these efforts, as I showed in chapter three, were not without contestation as films moved across national borders to enter the social and cultural context in Thailand. Criticisms of the influence of the US went beyond cultural threats. For Thai filmmakers, US film studios presented an unfair economic and technical advantage, and dominated the Thai market through exploitative monopolies. The men also saw the Thai government as complicit, particularly in the unfair trade and import policies that made it economically challenging to produce films locally in Thailand. Thus, the debate over building a national cinema of Thailand was deeply concerned with the nation's international relationships and trade policies. In turn, representations of gender and sexuality and class were connected to Thailand's modern conceptions of nationalism and its international relationships.

For Rat Pettanyi, however, the main issue was method. In 1962, Rat published an article titled "The Thai Film Industry" in the journal *Khwaam ru khue prathip* (*Knowledge is Light*). In it, he described the importance for Thai filmmakers to make the switch from sixteen millimeter to thirty-five millimeter film stock. In the article, Rat wrote that, "The production of a sixteen millimeter film requires very little budget, because it is a film that has no sound, that uses very little equipment aside from a camera and a few lights. And any home at all can be used as a studio. Sixteen millimeter film like this can only be shown in Thailand. For this reason, the sixteen millimeter film market is extremely narrow, and must ultimately meet with the unfavorable competition." This description captures many of the perceptions of the sixteen millimeter industry that informed attempts at modernization and, eventually, official efforts to incentivize the development of the film industry.

Film scholars have designated the period in Thai cinema from the end of the Second World War to 1970-1972 as the “sixteen millimeter era.”³⁹² In pre-World War Two Thailand, as in the rest of the world, the professional industry favored the larger thirty-five millimeter film that resulted in better image quality. Sixteen millimeter film, by contrast, was reserved for non-commercial or amateur productions. The destruction of the war years, subsequent economic depression, and shifts in the regional economic system in meant that sixteen millimeter film sourced from Japan was much cheaper and easier to access. However, while the designation “sixteen millimeter era” emphasizes the technological features of filmmaking, it is also used to reference two other significant characteristics of the period.

First, it evidenced the post-WWII growth of non-elite filmmakers and Sino-Thai entrepreneurs who came to dominate the domestic production and distribution, respectively.³⁹³ Second, sixteen millimeter films relied heavily on the appeal of celebrity pairs in the *phra-ek* (male lead) and *nang-ek* (female lead) style.³⁹⁴ Audiences flocked to see films not based on the film’s directors, but to see their favorite celebrities. The most famous of these pairs were Mitr Chaibancha and Phetchara Chaowarat. The demand for these stars was great and Mitr himself starred in as many as 262 films in just thirteen years.³⁹⁵ For critics of the sixteen millimeter style, this meant that audiences prioritized celebrity over the quality of the artistic production.

Sixteen millimeter films were also characterized by specific exhibition and production practices. They were derived from traditional forms of theatrical performance, such as with *likay*, that drew content and inspiration from interactions with the audience, as well as their setting and

³⁹² May Adadol Ingwanij, “Mother India,” 100.

³⁹³ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 73.

³⁹⁴ Dome Sukwong, *History of Thai Film*, 40.

³⁹⁵ Harrison, “The Man with the Golden Gauntlets,” 196.

context.³⁹⁶ In Western cinema, immobile, silent audiences sit in darkened theaters to view films. It also relied on narrative continuity and perfected editing. All of this contributed to audiences forgetting that they were watching a film and the cinematic image of the “more than real.”³⁹⁷

By contrast, Thai cinematic behaviors included mobile spectators. The audiences viewed films within a festival-like atmosphere in which shouting at the screen or performers was not inappropriate. There was no expectation that the spectator should never interfere with the screen. This worked in both directions. Actors and film narrators posed as a medium between the screen and the spectators.³⁹⁸ Due to this, actors and narrators skills were valued according to their ability to improvise, often by drawing inspiration from the local surroundings, thereby not only connecting the performance with the audience’s own reality, but also negating any serious possibility of reproduction and repetition.³⁹⁹

Sixteen millimeter productions also used the stock characters familiar from theatrical forms. The included primary characters *phra-ek* (main hero) and *nang-ek* (main heroine), the supporting characters, *phra rong* (supporting hero), and *nang rong* (supporting heroine), and the villains *tua kong* (male villain) and *tua itcha* (female villain, or lit. the jealous character), and the *tua talok* (the comedian).⁴⁰⁰ The *tua talok* was a spontaneous character, who interacted with the audience through teasing and jokes. The *tua talok* might provoke the *phra ek* or provide reflective narration. This reflective device was performed in cinema through comedic character roles within films as well as in live film narration by *nak phak*.⁴⁰¹

The narrative structure of sixteen millimeter era films also featured disaggregated

³⁹⁶ Nithi, “Nam Nao,” 46.

³⁹⁷ Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 181.

³⁹⁸ Nithi, “Nam Nao,” 49.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁰⁰ Patsorn Sungsi, *Thai National Cinema*, 55.

⁴⁰¹ Nithi, “Nam Nao,” 47.

structures and less attention to polished scene transitions. Continuity and perfect editing, so important in Hollywood films, was not a priority of sixteen millimeter productions. Again, this was because the construction of reality for audiences was less important. Sixteen millimeter productions also lacked the point-of-view (POV) or shot-reverse-shots that contributed to narrative structures, editing continuity, and pull audiences in to internal psychological experiences of film characters.⁴⁰²

They instead favored long or wide shots that created a frame similar to what a stage audience might see. For example, Thai film scholar Mary Ainslie described this style in the film *Nang Phrai Tani* (The Nymph of Tani):

A scene... running for 4.30 minutes depicts four characters in a café buying and eating coffee and noodles... Despite its considerable length, this scene does not contain any POV shots or corresponding structures, there are very few one-person reaction shots and no direct point-of-view shots... The scene begins with a frontal long shot containing all the characters. The camera is positioned almost directly in front of the action and, although it obeys the 180 degree rule of continuity editing, it largely... remains in this long shot.⁴⁰³

The impact of this style is to emphasize the collective image and character actions, rather than character emotions and psychologies. Editing and cinematography, and by extension film editors and cinematographers, played a far less important role than in contemporary national film industries.

Furthermore, the sixteen millimeter era was characterized by blending genres. Whereas Hollywood films followed typical patterns derived from the standards of musical, western, or

⁴⁰² Mary Jane Ainslie, "Contemporary Thai Horror Film: A Monstrous Hybrid" (PhD, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2012), 55. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 66. Shot-reverse-shots, for example, show one character looking at a second character, and then the second character looking back at the first character. It is a major feature of continuity editing that helps viewers perceive that, for example, the characters are looking at each other even when you don't see the characters at the same time.

⁴⁰³ Ainslie, "Thai Horror Film," 55. The 180 degree rule is a cinematography rule that states that in any one scene, characters should remain in the same left/right relationship with each other. To maintain this, the camera can only operate within a 180 degree axis opposite the characters. This helps to keep from disorienting the audiences, since to cross the line would create a reverse image.

other genres, Thai filmmakers mixed them up. As Dome Sukwong commented to film scholar Patsorn Sungsi, “Thai film is like Thai food, which blends a lot of flavor in one meal. The conventional Thai film blends emotions and emotional states such as melancholy, excitement, arousal and romance.”⁴⁰⁴ This is perhaps the common feature between all Thai films, whether sixteen or thirty-five millimeter.

Thai film and cultural critic May Adadol Ingawanij suggested that Tom Gunning’s concept of the “cinema of attractions” is useful for considering sixteen millimeter films. This concept refers to the non-narrative style of cinema that was dominant until 1906-7 featuring mainly “actuality” films, such as travel shows. Such cinema based its quality on the “ability to *show* something”; it is, in other words, an “exhibitionist” cinema.⁴⁰⁵ Gunning writes that, “[f]rom comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of the conjurors in magic films, this is a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.”⁴⁰⁶ This form of cinema relies on the spectacle and uniqueness of the event itself to draw audience curiosity and deliver sensorial pleasure. Furthermore, the “cinema of attractions” was at its essence a form of mass culture consumed by audiences “not acculturated to the traditional arts.”⁴⁰⁷ In much of the world, however, the “cinema of attractions” fell out of favor between about 1906 to 1907 as narrative continuity and darkened rooms became popular. The visibility of the camera became taboo.

Using this framework of the “cinema of attraction,” May termed the sixteen millimeter cinema the “plebeian Thai cinema dispositive.”⁴⁰⁸ May argued that by the 1960s, however,

⁴⁰⁴ Dome Sukwong quoted in Patsorn Sungsi, “Thai Cinema as National Cinema: An Evaluative History” (Phd, Murdoch University, 2004), 54.

⁴⁰⁵ Gunning, “Early Cinema,” 57.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 57.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁰⁸ May, “Mother India.”

sixteen millimeter cinema was delegitimized in Thailand. By that time, a cinematic hierarchy favoring Hollywood films and a discourse deriding the low quality, amateur Thai productions had gained strength. The state of Thai cinema had become a source of anxiety and embarrassment for Thai elites and intellectuals, as evidenced by the term *nang nam nao*.⁴⁰⁹

Indeed, the characteristics found in the sixteen millimeter film industry were criticized as part of a growing discourse about the low, amateur quality of domestic Thai film production, as well as audience behaviors at cinemas. On the one hand, the preferences of rural audiences drove film content. As one film wholesaler noted in the 1970s, “from the standpoint of film production, it is necessary to produce films on a low budget that appeal to the public in both cities and rural villages. As a result, their material is so full of different elements that the overall point becomes unclear.”⁴¹⁰ The association with provincialism was linked to poor quality.

On the other hand, filmmakers were blamed for the deficiency of national cinema. Insufficient knowledge of film production and editing, rather than Thai performance traditions, was thought to account for the lack of continuity editing. These complaints simultaneously recognized the widening market for domestic film and the implications of that growth for cinema’s role as a symbol of the national project toward development and progress in a globalizing landscape. It was in part out of a rejection of prevailing film practices and a desire to see an aesthetically and politically sophisticated national cinema that the debates over Thai film evolved and took shape.

Meanwhile, as established in chapters one and two, the development programs of the 1960s facilitated travelling film shows and permanent cinema construction through the expansion of roads, infrastructure, and electrification, and were accompanied by increased

⁴⁰⁹Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1992,” 82

⁴¹⁰Quoted in Ainslie, “Thai Horror Film,” 71.

importation of foreign films, especially from the United States.⁴¹¹ Urban and, to a lesser extent, provincial audiences had a greater ability to self-select their viewing spaces, increasingly based on language, class, and the reputation of the cinema. The development era in Thai film raised new and pointed challenges for the industry. The expansion of Thai film production, foreign importation, and cinema infrastructure not only resulted in increasing audience differentiation, but also created a hierarchical discourse of film spectatorship based on those choices.

This shift also had important implications for the ideological impact of cinema in Thailand. Film theorist Abraham Kaplan argued that audience interactions with popular art (in the style of Hollywood films) might be understood to be something similar to the differences between exhibitionism and voyeurism, but also between response and reaction on the part of the spectators, with popular art favoring the latter of each. Kaplan called popular art “predigested,” to describe how, with the illusion of reality, the audience stops doing work and becomes a passive body.⁴¹² That is to say, that perception, an important dynamic that filmmakers have long sought to manipulate, is replaced by recognition.

Likewise, Gunning explained those processes in the cinema of attractions:

It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to film making. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.⁴¹³

This dynamic has additional implications on an affective level: rather than eliciting a meaningful emotional reaction to art, what Kaplan called popular art relies on sentimentality lacking in

⁴¹¹ Boonrak, “The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1992,” 72.

⁴¹² Abraham Kaplan, “The Aesthetics of the Popular Arts,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24, no. 3 (1966): 355-356.

⁴¹³ Gunning, “Early Cinema,” 59.

meaning and depth. As Kaplan notes, “The tears are real enough, but they have no reason—only a cause.”⁴¹⁴

The first major success of the sixteen millimeter era was Prince Sukrawandit’s 1949 *Suphaphurut suea Thai* (Criminal Without Sin).⁴¹⁵ The film depicted “gentlemen” fighters styled after the popular reputation of Prince Chumphon, or Prince Aphakon, the “father” of the modern Thai navy. It proved an enormous success. Dome summarized its influence thus: “It had the impact of awakening the film industry. People leaped to join the industry in large numbers at once, as may be seen in the numerous films that were produced in the next year.”⁴¹⁶ Whereas only ten Thai productions were made between 1947 and 1949, after 1949 the numbers grew to between fifty and sixty films per year. Over the whole period until 1972, approximately 1,384 films were made locally (in both thirty-five and sixteen millimeter).⁴¹⁷

Suphaphurut suea Thai was made using sixteen millimeter color-reversal film. Reversal film produces a positive image on a transparent base, rather than using negatives and prints, which are more expensive due to the additional processing required. This type of the film was the preferred variety for amateur or home filmmakers in the west from the 1930s through to the 1970s. In Thailand, it was useful for filmmakers who had neither the financial resources nor access to foreign production facilities required for thirty-five millimeter negative film. It also allowed these filmmakers to use color relatively cheaply for the first time. *Suphaphurut suea Thai*, like most other films, was also narrated live.

In the early 1950s, the broader context of the Cold War and decolonization meant that new policy issues and unprecedented changes were arising, including in Southeast Asia. To think

⁴¹⁴ Kaplan, “Popular Arts,” 359.

⁴¹⁵ Momchao Sukruanrondit Ditsakun, *Suphaphurut Suea Thai (Criminal Without Sin)* (Parameru Phapphayon, 1949). The literal title is “Thai Gentlemen Bandits.”

⁴¹⁶ Dome, *History of Thai Film*, 37.

⁴¹⁷ Herrera, “16mm Cinema,” 29.

about those issues on a large scale, American scholars articulated what was to be called modernization theory. In basic terms, modernization theory proposed a “common and essential pattern of ‘development,’ defined by progress in technology, military and bureaucratic institutions, and the political and social structure.”⁴¹⁸ To a large degree, modernization theory was premised on the idea that the United States provided a model for the world.⁴¹⁹ It came to dominate US thinking about America’s role in the world and change in postcolonial societies. This was true as well in Thailand, although as I have discussed “tradition” and “modernity” were deployed with positive and negative meanings, depending on the context. While modernization theorists downplayed the individuality of so-called underdeveloped countries, Thailand’s uniqueness was more openly utilized.⁴²⁰ In other words, there remained a time and place for Thai tradition. However, in other cases, modernity was the order of the day. As I will show, the film industry was one sphere in which modernization was celebrated.

The World Bank was an important institution internationally for promoting many of the key aspects of modernization theory, and for institutionalizing development as an ideology more generally. A core aim of the World Bank, and of the post-Bretton Woods perspective, was to facilitate “global integration through free trade.”⁴²¹ The World Bank Mission spent between July 1957 and June 1958 in Thailand. Afterwards, it released a “program” for national development, in which it made development recommendations for the next five years. That program was the primary inspiration for Thailand’s first six-year National Economic Development Plan, which covered the years from 1961 to 1966. At the time, Thailand’s economy was dependent on a few agricultural exports, mainly rice, rubber, and tin. Meanwhile, previous governments’ attempts at

⁴¹⁸ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 3.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, 5.

⁴²¹ Ibid, 37.

industrialization were not successful.⁴²² The new plan called for growth in the industrial and agricultural sectors, as well as an increase in electric power generation, particularly through dams. It also provided for significant expansion and improvement in modes of transportation and communication, and education “geared to development requirements.”⁴²³

External factors alone were not responsible for the ascendance of development discourse in Thailand. In the early and mid-1950s, as I discussed, Phibun to a large degree led efforts at development and the alliance with the United States. However, in October 1957, in the midst of the World Bank Mission’s visit in Thailand, Sarit successfully led a coup against Phibun’s government. In part to legitimate his government, Sarit forcefully backed development programs for the duration of his regime.⁴²⁴ Under Sarit, moreover, development and progress also became linked to broader ideas of “environmental cleanliness (*khwam sa-ad*), properness of things (*khwam riaproy*), and material well-being.”⁴²⁵ The two concepts, development and progress, thus became part of a national behavior and aesthetic.

Even as modernization and development discourses were becoming more influential, sixteen millimeter films were gaining in popularity and commercial success. One of the first films to gross more than one million baht was Rangsi Thatsanaphayak’s 1959 *Mae nak pra khanong* (Nak of Pra Khanong). While this film featured key technical aspects of the era, such as sixteen millimeter format and live narration, it also utilized key aspects of sixteen millimeter film form, especially moments of “attraction” and genre-blending. Discussing *Mae mak pra khanong*, Ainslie observed that:

Throughout the film there are plenty of horrific elements.... However alongside this there

⁴²² Eliezer B. Ayal, “Thailand’s Six Year National Economic Development Plan,” *Asian Survey* 1, no. 11 (1962): 33.

⁴²³ Ibid, 35.

⁴²⁴ Anderson, “Introduction to In the Mirror,” 83.

⁴²⁵ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 108.

are also numerous scenes of comedy, such as slapstick numbers performed by the fool. Together with these comedic and horrific numbers there are also heavily exaggerated romantic numbers such as the early shy and flirtatious courting and then marriage of Mak and Nak. These diverse ‘numbers’ are also accompanied by the opening action-packed joyous communal temple celebrations, at which Mak and Nak meet and the unrestrained mass fist fights which ensue from fighting gangs after the celebrations. Finally, the film ends in a tragic separations scene... This final scene in particular is drawn out to include the two lovers calling to each other from across the divide, extending the tragic moment into a number that elicits strong sympathetic emotions from the viewer.⁴²⁶

Several scholars, including Dome’s reference above, have related this genre blending to the idea of *rot*, or flavor.⁴²⁷ A common advertisement at the time was “bursting with all possible flavors (*khrop thuk rot*).”⁴²⁸

Dok Din Kanyamal produced the most popular films of the sixteen-millimeter era. Dok Din first worked as a comedic actor in stage plays before transitioning to filmmaking in the 1950s, where he initially played the *tua talok*. He made some forty-three or more films in approximately thirty-one years, many starring Mitr and Phetchara. Dok Din films were ever present on the popular cinema scene until his last film in 1983.⁴²⁹

In 1964, for example, he made *Nok noi*, which starred Mitr and Phetchara. The film was a story about Nok, a young girl who lives with her adopted mother and abusive adopted father. After her mother dies, she is forced to live off the streets, occasionally finding places to sleep and eat. She meets Jak, who falls in love with her. But she runs off to Isan, where she finds her parents. The film was hugely successful, earning over one million baht. In fact, “A Million Already! A Million Already! Black Dok Din!” became the slogan for the film. The film also received royal support, first in being granted permission to use King Bhumibol’s *Chada Chiwit*, or H.M Blues, as its theme song. King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit watched the film at a

⁴²⁶ Ainslie, “Thai Horror Film,” 45.

⁴²⁷ May, “Mother India”; Ainslie, “Thai Horror Film”; Herrera, “16mm Cinema.”

⁴²⁸ Herrera, “16mm Cinema,” 39.

⁴²⁹ The exact number of Dok Din films are unknown, even by himself, as a number of films were lost, often after copies were sent out with traveling cinema shows. Interview with Dok Din, July 22nd, 2012.

screening at Dusit Palace.

In 1967 Dok Din made *Julatrikhun*, once again starring Mitr and Phetchara.⁴³⁰ In key respects, *Julatrikhun* represents exactly the type of film that critics of the style, including the TMPPA, advocated against. The film was quickly made using sixteen millimeter film and, as mentioned, starred Mitr and Phetchara in the leading roles, alongside a secondary couple played by a second famous pairing, Sombat Mettani and Naowarat Wachara. Based on a popular novel of the same name, and therefore already a familiar story, the film told the love story of Princess Dararai and King Ariwat, each from two mythical warring kingdoms in the distant past. The film ends tragically with both of their deaths, but, happily, the pair is reunited in a heavenly state where they are free from earthly concerns and may forever enjoy their love. The music of the film was almost entirely from an already well-known song of the same name, *Julatrikhun*.

In terms of editing, the film suffered from shaky camera work, and rough transitions between different shots and scenes. All of the character voices were dubbed over to give them a stereotyped character, with deep, masculine voices for most of the men, high-pitched, nasal voices for the comedic characters, and high, feminine tones for the females.⁴³¹ It also featured numerous *tua talok*, including a comedic third romantic pairing whose role was little more than to elicit laughs from the audience. In terms of narrative, numerous scenes are included that contribute little to plot progression, such as extended dancing and scenes between the comedic love pair.

These characteristics are important to evaluate in terms of their effect on spectator

⁴³⁰ Dok Din Kanyamal, *Julatrikhun* (Dok Din Phapphayon, 1967). Ingkhasak, *Presenting Dok Din: The Artist of the People (Ni Khue Chiwit Khong Dok Din: Sinlapin Khong Prachachon)* (Phutthamonthon: Thai Film Museum, 2011), 93.

⁴³¹ Aside from indicating the role of the characters, this tendency likely came about also in part due to the use of non-synchronous sound technologies. It also probably resulted in less difference in a film's original sound and the experience of live narration.

experience. Rough editing and the unnaturalness of the character voices both distract viewers with the constructed nature of the film. While this film does follow the narrative style, it featured many moments similar to those described in the cinema of attractions. Certainly the structure of the film and familiarity of the story would have lent itself to the atmosphere of an outdoor screening with a mobile audience. By way of example, a considerable amount of time is spent on two back-to-back episodes in which the two lead men, along with their cronies, are captured and jailed. This is followed by their escape, made possible by the cunning seduction and distraction of the jail guards by their female romantic companions. The redundancy of these events serves more to provide comedy at the guard's gullibility, pleasure at the bodily displays of the women, and excitement at the ensuing action scenes.

The film also contains explicitly sexualized scenes. That recalls another aspect of the cinema of attractions, in which eroticized scenes that have no purpose in plot progression are included solely for the subject's pleasure. A highly puzzling sequence of scenes begins with two female members of the court in a large bath, being massaged by servants and chatting with each other. The two begin tickling each other in the bath, during which time a great deal of their bodies may be seen (though presumably stopping just short of what the censors would allow). The film then jumps to the two in bed together, clothing in sparkly bras and harem pants, where they discuss their disgust at the concept of love. The two women fall asleep, after which Sombat's character randomly enters the room, wakes one of the women. She quickly forgets her alarm and allows Sombat to seduce her into a kiss. The second woman, who has also woken, secretly watches. After he leaves, she reacts with jealousy and anger.

This scene does nothing for the narrative of the film, beyond character development in showing the attractive powers of the manly Sombat. It more clearly acts as stimuli for the

pleasure of the audience. One might imagine the types of vocal reactions the scenes would have elicited from the audience, and certainly would have provided great material for any narrator. The scenes don't so much present narrative as much as a series of images to form a spectacle and provoke the viewing body.

When compared to the popular sixteen millimeter films, Rat Pettanyi's films appear to be from a different universe. Rat is generally viewed as the ultimate Thai "auteur." The term auteur, which means author and connotes the idea that a director's creative vision is reflected in his film style, may truly apply to Rat, as he was involved in so many aspects of his film production, from business, script-writing, cinematography, production, and more. His status as the ultimate Thai film auteur, moreover, contrasts with filmmakers of the sixteen millimeter period, who were often overshadowed by celebrity actors and live narrators. Indeed, the director-as-auteur would be a major element of his critiques of the domestic industry and focus of reform in his work with the TMPPA.

Rat was born in Bangkok to an Iranian family in 1908. His grandfather migrated from Iran long before Rat's birth. But that heritage, and Rat's distinctively non-Thai name, apparently frequently caused people to think he was Indian. He did end up spending time studying in India, where he apparently demonstrated his nature ability with visual arts by winning a prize in India's first national photographic competition at the age of twelve.⁴³² Rat then moved to England, where he trained in engineering at the University of London. It was in the Great Britain that Rat made his first forays into filmmaking, although what inspired the move is unclear. He made his first film in 1937, a short called *Taeng*.⁴³³ Rat entered the film into the 1938 Scottish Amateur Film Festival (SAFF). Alfred Hitchcock presided over the ceremony. A newspaper recounted

⁴³² Chalida Uabumrungjit, "Ratana Pestonji: A Jewel in the Crown of Thai Cinema," *Cinemaya* 35 (1997): 18.

⁴³³ Rat Pettanyi, *Taeng*, 1937.

Hitchcock's appraisal of the film:

“[Taeng],” an account of a day in the life of a poor Siamese widow and her little son, the adjudicator said had a human atmosphere, and an emotional effect which was difficult to ignore. There were too many captions, he added: scenes of the actual accident could have been substituted for a caption stating that the dog had been run over—though it might have used up too many dogs.⁴³⁴

Taeng was awarded the prize for “Best Film from a British Subject Abroad” along with an Australian film.

Oddly, however, the award didn't recognized Rat as being Siamese. Instead, he became a “British Subject Abroad.” Thai film critic Chalida Uabumrungjit attributes this to the classification system, with only two categories: British films and British subjects abroad. Apparently, Siam was included in the latter category.⁴³⁵ It was a strange choice, considering that Siam was never a British colony. Despite this, however, Chalida commented optimistically that, “Even though today the film *Taeng* is still in the book of lost films, but at least the film made the word “Siamese” appear in foreign newspapers.”

The screening of *Taeng*, as well as Rat's next film, *Ruea bai si khao* (White Boat), at the 1939 New York World's Fair, together serve as evidence of Rat being amongst the first Thais to exhibit their films abroad.⁴³⁶ However, quickly afterwards, Rat returned to Thailand, where he quickly began building a reputation for himself domestically. Simultaneously, Rat cast off his amateur roots and entered into the world of “professional” filmmaking. Rat worked for Nai Loed Company and Ditham Company for several years. His big break came when Prince Phanuphan Yukhon asked him to be the cinematographer for *Phanthai norasing* (Oarsman Norasing).⁴³⁷ He made one sixteen millimeter production, *Tukata ja* (Dear Dolly), before founding his own studio,

⁴³⁴ Quoted in Chalida Uabumrungjit, “‘Daeng’ and the First Honor for a Thai Short Film,” *Nang: Thai* 1999 (1999): 35.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 36.

⁴³⁶ Anchalee, “The Man Who Died for His Art.”

⁴³⁷ Chalida, “Ratana Pestonji,” 18.

Hanuman Film Inc., in 1953. Thereafter, Rat worked exclusively with thirty-five millimeter film stock.

That choice was directly opposite to the mainstream trends of the 1950s. As a director, Rat used not only advanced technologies, but also more innovative techniques than other directors of mainstream cinema. Chalida described this difference in Rat's most "mainstream" efforts, writing that, "He never became a mainstream director, not even when he tried to make his last film, *Sugar is Not Sweet*, as a popular formula musical-romance-comedy. He put in commercial ingredients like stars, songs, dances, sex, etc., but it came out as a parody of the genre."⁴³⁸ These stylistic features led to his films being critically acclaimed, but typically unpopular in the box office. Indeed, most of Rat's films lost money.

It is strange, then, that the rise of a respectable national "Thai" cinema is so closely linked to the activities of one man who, by all accounts, not only did the opposite of what the rest of Thai filmmakers were doing, but also never produced a domestically popular film. The characterization is all the more interesting, considering that in fact, rather than presenting aberrations to domestic filmmaking, Rat's films represent something of a middle ground between the styles of indigenous Thai filmmaking. Use of both song and spoken words, for example, are a feature of many of his films. However, Rat's films engaged with these characteristics through careful editing, high quality image, and continuous story editing.

Because so many of Rat's films were seen as symbolic of positive progress at the time of their production, as well as forming the backbone of the modern Thai film canon today, they are worth discussing in detail. Analyses of these films will make clearer the directions that the industry subsequently took with Rat at its helm. I will focus on two of his films released commercially for the Thai market. Rat's commercial films included *Chuaifah din salai* (Forever

⁴³⁸ Ibid, 19.

Yours, 1955), *Rongraem narok* (Country Hotel, 1957), *Sawan mued* (Dark Heaven, 1958), *Phrae dam* (Black Silk, 1961), and *Namtan mai wan* (Sugar is Not Sweet, 1964). The two films that have arguable done the most to place Rat in Thai film history are *Rongraem narok* and *Phrae dam*.

Rongraem narok, which I discussed in the introduction, was a blend of innovative camerawork and humorous ribaldry. The story took place at a tiny country hotel, which had only one room, a bar, and a small lobby/dining area. Noi runs the hotel and acts as the barman. Chana, a young man, is the hotel's only guest. But his place is threatened with the arrival of Riam, a young woman who, as noted in the introduction, claims to be an opium smuggler. She attempts to claim Chana's room, but is firmly rejected by Chana. Riam is forced to make do with the sofa in the lobby.

Chana's presence at the hotel is explained when rumors surface that local bandits, including the famous Suea Din. Apparently, they discovered that Chana, who is an accountant for a large company, is about to make a substantial cash transfer. The bandits intend to steal the money. But before Suea Din arrives, some other bandits led by Suea Sit take over the hotel first. As Chana and Riam attempt to escape the bandits, they also develop feelings for each other. Then Suea Din arrives, and challenges Suea Sit to a form of Russian roulette. Instead of playing, however, Suea Sit shoots and kills Suea Din. Just at that moment, however, the police arrive and capture Suea Din. It is then revealed that Riam is in fact the daughter of the owner of Chana's company. Chana at first assumes that this means that they cannot ever be together, but Riam acts offended and demands that they get married immediately!

Rongraem narok was the first film in which Rat served as director, and was the first over which he had almost complete control. He also served as the creative director, scriptwriter, and

cinematographer. The film was made in black and white, with thirty-five millimeter film stock. Apparently, the decision to film entirely in black and white at a time when more and more films were made in color was made to allow the entire production of the film to stay in Thailand (color films had to be sent abroad for processing). It also saved on production costs.⁴³⁹

Rongraem Narok was filmed entirely on a single set, the lobby of a small hotel. In addition to using the small space, Rat only used one camera. This meant that often times the camera would not follow the movements of characters, but instead allowed them to move on and off camera, resulted in many non-diegetic features. This also meant that the film used medium shots, and very few close-ups or POV shots. The strategy has been compared to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). But *Rope* is famous for the use of long shots (usually of about ten minutes), whereas *Rongraem narok* makes ample use of cuts.⁴⁴⁰

In addition to these cinematographic features, Rat also drew on the spontaneous traditions seen in other Thai films, but to very different effect. *Rongraem Narok* is full of elements similar in some respects to the cinema of attractions. The owner of the hotel and barman, Noi, also engages in periodic arm wrestling challenges. A marching band occasionally comes through and practices in the lobby of the hotel. Midway through the film, Flor Oriente performs *Dahil sa Iyo*. One of the women drinking at the bar introduces herself as Yupphadi. In fact, the actress played the character Yupphadi in Rat's earlier film *Chua fa din salai*. But these features are linked to the film, as they contribute to the character of the hotel as a place in which anything can happen. During Oriente's song, for example, the various characters go on with their business, revealing importance aspects of their personalities and relationships. The scenes are simultaneously attractive and critical parts of the broader narrative.

⁴³⁹ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁴⁰ Anchalee, "The Man Who Died for His Art."

In the time between the production of *Rongraem narok* in 1958 and that of Hanuman Film's 1961 *Phrae dam*, a great deal had changed in Thai politics and the Bangkok sociopolitical order. Sufficient time had passed for Sarit to institute not only his policy priorities, but his style of leadership as well. Sarit relied on a paternalistic, father-child (*pho-luk*) style that drew on notions of traditional authority and kingly charisma.⁴⁴¹ In this thinking, the benevolence of a leader (*phokhun*) legitimated any severe actions and meant that the leader could "never become a tyrant."⁴⁴² To a large degree, Sarit's relationship with Luang Wichit Wathakan influenced his thinking about political development. Luang Wichit was earlier a major player in the Phibun government, particularly influencing the hyper-nationalist cultural campaigns of the 1930s. The cultural, militaristic nationalism of Luang Wichit that claimed origin in historical political traditions combined with Sarit's authoritarian style to produce a particular style of Thai political order.

Sarit viewed the new order as a revolution, but also a return to past greatness. First, as I discussed in chapter one, the monarchy was revitalized as a symbol of national unity and identity. Second, Sarit sought to return the country to a state of *khwam riaproy* (orderliness).⁴⁴³ This meant advocating proper social behaviors and personal hygiene. It also meant ridding the country of drugs and *anthaphan* (hoodlums). Indeed Sarit's campaign against *anthaphan*, which included mass arrests, interrogation, and executions, became a major demonstration of Sarit's will to institute his authority. It was also related to his belief that young people, particularly those in Bangkok, needed to return to a traditional lifestyle. Accordingly, the government banned rock and roll music, the "twist" dance, and detained youths who went out to night entertainment. He also aimed to rid the streets of prostitutes, pedicabs, beggars, and stray dogs, all part of what

⁴⁴¹ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 111-112.

⁴⁴² Ibid, 116.

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 121.

Thak called a “program for social purification.”⁴⁴⁴ Third, Sarit’s government was the first to take seriously the needs and welfare of Isan.⁴⁴⁵ Sarit’s personal origins in Isan, combined with the regions strategic significance, meant that Isan became critical to Sarit’s vision of national development. Thus, Sarit managed to institute lasting and deep changes in the space of just a few years.

Many of the features of Sarit’s new order were depicted in *Phrae Dam*. Indeed, as I will discuss, the film was a clear product of the specific time in which it was made. However, for all its inclusion of domestic issues, *Phrae dam* was explicitly intended to appeal to the international audience at international film festivals.⁴⁴⁶ The title refers to the lead character Phrae, a widow with a young baby to take care of. She always wears black, in mourning for her late husband. The film begins with Phrae at a Buddhist ceremony, where a priest gives a sermon about the consequences of karma. Phrae is a devout Buddhist and works as a weaver. She has an admirer, Thom, but refuses to advance their relationship. Thom works for a troubled nightclub owner and gangster, Seni, who is heavily in debt. After Seni’s brother dies and leaves him a substantial inheritance, Seni comes up with a plot to trick his debtor, Wan. But as part of the trick, Thom must bring Phrae along, so that she can pretend to buy land from Wan. Thom agrees, believing that Seni will give Thom enough money afterwards in order to allow him to marry and settle down with Phrae.

But when the con goes awry and results in Wan’s death, Seni comes to fear that virtuous Phrae will betray their secret. So he has his workers kidnap her baby to secure her silence. Thom, after being offered 20,000 baht to cooperate, pretends to be dead. Phrae is led to a disturbing room, cast in red light, where Thom pretends to be dead in a coffin. Seni, shown only as a

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 122.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, 131.

⁴⁴⁶ Rat Pettanyi, *Phrae Dam (Black Silk)* (Hanuman Phapphayon, 1961).

shadow in the light of a bamboo slated door, tells her that he is the father of the dead man. He claims to have taken Thom's life as retribution. He threatens that if Phrae ever tells the police, he will kill her child. Phrae runs away, terrified. Her abbot advises her to ordain, and find peace in life as a nun. Phrae shaves her head, and ordains. Her costume changes from her mourning black to the white robes of a nun.

Sometime later, Thom visits the clinic, where he has left the sick baby. He discovers that she is very ill, and requires surgery. Thom decides to find Phrae in order to have her see her baby before the surgery. He convinces Phrae to disrobe, and brings her back to his house to pick up money for the doctor. But one of Seni's gang sees them, and alerts Seni. Thom tells Phrae that he is remorseful. He offers her all his money, and vows to ordain as a monk. But Seni interrupts them, and tries to kill Phrae. After a fight, Thom shoots Seni to death. Thom and Phrae are arrested by the police. While in prison, Phrae is informed that her baby did not live. The two are put on trial, but only Thom is found guilty and sentenced to death under the rules of martial law. In an extended execution scene, he is put to death. Phrae, meanwhile, re-ordains as a nun. The film ends with the same sermon with which it begins.

The film is mainly highly regarded for its striking use of color and sharp editing. Pen-Ek Ratanaruang once recalled that "If I could choose, I would love to remake *Prae Dum* (Black Silk). It is so, so, so atmospheric and film noir. The shot when the camera pans from the coffin to the pair of sandals on the floor still gives me a chill. That shot would have made Hitchcock proud."⁴⁴⁷ But it is strange that the film has so often been termed a "film noir," even by those with extensive knowledge of international cinematic history and film theory. Not only does terming *Phrae dam* a film noir ignore the historical context in which the genre emerged in the

⁴⁴⁷ "Perspectives Film Festival | Black Silk," *Perspectives Film Festival*, accessed August 21, 2016, http://perspectivesfilmfestival.com/archive2013/films/05_black_silk.html.

United States in the 1940s to 1950s, but it also lacks key defining features. Specifically, film noir is typically characterized by black and white low-key lighting, absence of a happy ending (or even the promise of one), seedy locations, murderous and seductive women (particularly in lead female characters), and highly stylized costumes. While not all of these features are universal in film noirs, filmmaker Paul Schrader suggested that the films emphasize “loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style.”⁴⁴⁸ While *Phrae Dam* has a distinct style, it is not clear that it would fit into the style of film noir. Furthermore, the film lacks some of the defining characteristics that Schrader identifies, particularly nostalgia and a lack of priorities. In the end, the film maintains some hope for the heroine.

The focus on the quality of the film and suggestions of its status as one of Thailand’s “firsts” also distracts from the content of the film. In fact, *Phrae dam* is a fascinating depiction of political and social life in Bangkok during the military years under Sarit in the early 1960s. On the one hand, the film includes various scenes from Bangkok’s daily life, during boat trips in the canals, various temples, and nightlife entertainment. Like Rat’s other films, songs are featured throughout the film, usually presented as an act at Seni’s club. A real sense of 1960s Bangkok social life emerges from these scenes.

The film depicted several controversial aspects of Bangkok life. On the one hand, gangsters (*anthaphan*) are at the heart of the film. In a sense, all the problems faced by Thom and Phrae arise from gang warfare and competition. Their activities more broadly are depicted as troubling for Bangkok authorities. And when punishment is passed on Thom, it is made explicit that the laws imposed by martial law under Sarit allow, and indeed demand, his execution. The trial and subsequent execution take a full twenty minutes of the film.

⁴⁴⁸ Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” *Film Comment* 8, no. 1 (1972): 11.

The execution is particularly drawn out, with all of the notable features of Thai executions shown clearly, from Thom being tied into a *wai* position to the stabilized machine gun used by the executioner. Whereas in the 1920s the portrayal of an execution was cause for censorship, there is no evidence that Rat faced any troubles for the depiction. Indeed, the execution of gangsters was a point of pride for the Sarit regime.⁴⁴⁹

Furthermore, it is interesting that one of Thai national cinema's most renowned films features such a non-“Thai” cast of players. I've already discussed Rat's own birth, and distinct identity within central Thai bourgeois circles. The film also starred his daughter, Ratanawadi Ratanaphan, who had distinctly non-Thai features, although of course she was still beautiful. Sinthip Siriwan, who previously played the lead in *country hotel*, played the secondary role of Phrae's faithful friend. She was also clearly intended not to be like the bombastic stars of the celebrity system. Indeed, she spent much of the film with a shaved head, a striking difference from Phetchara's dramatic hairstyles.

The depiction of Phrae was indicative of Rat's distinctive approach to female characters more generally. None of them were stereotypical in the sense of the typically helpless and passive sixteen millimeter characters. Phrae and Riam both, for the most part, made their own decisions about their lives and were demonstrated to be independent figures. The fact that many of Rat's films were based on love stories didn't prevent the female leads from being complex characters. Indeed, they were often deeply flawed, as with Yupphadi in *Chua fa din salai*, who engaged in an adulterous relationship with her husband's son. But she was also portrayed sympathetically, even if in the end she had to face the consequences of her actions and died. In part, the complexity of female characters in Rat's films speaks to his ability to communicate human emotions. They also offer a sharp contrast to depictions in later domestic films in the

⁴⁴⁹ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 121.

1970s, which I will examine in the next chapter.

In 1963, the government once again took up the issue of official support for the domestic industry. This issue, long advocated for by filmmakers and Rat Pettanyi, had previously been approached by the Phibun government.⁴⁵⁰ But the troubled final year of his government and ultimate ousting put off the issue for an additional six years. By that point, censorship was on the rise. So too was the development of government propaganda in coordination with the United States, which was in the early stages of the Vietnam War expansion. The year 1963 also approached the halfway point of the national development plan. Thus, it may have seemed logical for the government to fund domestic film production both as a way to foster nationalistic film production and as part of its broader modernizing mission. Thus, between August and November 1963, notable members of the government and the film industry met together to discuss the formation of an official policy on domestic film production. While this effort would also prove unsuccessful, the basic ideas that emerged out of the 1963 discussions would inform the reforms instituted in the 1970s.

The Council was formally announced on the 18 July 1963. At the helm was Major General Prince Wan Waithyakon, the famous Thai diplomat and former Ambassador to the United Nations. In 1963, he was acting as the Deputy Prime Minister. Prince Phanuphan Yukon and his cousin, Prince Anuson Mongkhonkan, the founder of Lawo Studios, also sat on the council. Other members of the all-male council were prominent politicians, businessmen, civil servants, authors, and filmmakers, including Rat Pettanyi. The composition of the council made clear that elite political and economic interests, as well as those of the few major film studios, would determine the government's policy on the film industry.

Preceding the meetings, a flurry of correspondence was exchanged between the council's

⁴⁵⁰ Dome, *History of Thai Film*, 39.

members, the Board of Investment, and other government offices. Several of the filmmakers associated with the council provided lengthy letters giving their assessments of the state of the film industry and the measures needed to improve it. Prince Phanuphan was amongst the letter writers, and in key respects his letter (the lengthiest) provides a general overview of the prevailing mindset regarding what was needed. But his letter shows a softer approach to reform than the one that would later take hold in the 1970s. It is likely that his measured suggestions were informed by his long experience in the film industry, and resume that included both sixteen and thirty-five millimeter films. Certainly he recognized the need to develop the industry, but he also acknowledged the need to do so slowly and be respectful of people's livelihoods. In his letter, the transitional nature of evolving attitudes regarding the industry may be seen.

Like most others concerned with developing the industry, Phanuphan focused on the role of technology, and the differences between thirty-five and sixteen millimeter filmmaking. He linked the choice regarding which type of film directors chose to their professional mindset. Specifically, those that chose sixteen millimeter film tended to be less experienced, and were primarily interested in the mass market and making quick money. According to Phanuphan, they also tended to work within the star system style. Thus, Phanuphan asserted that those filmmakers were, by the nature of the sixteen millimeter market, less critical to the production of film, especially in comparison to celebrities. Furthermore, due to the lack of synchronous sound in sixteen millimeter filmmaking, narrators played a critical role. Because narrators were able to spontaneously change the script, they also contributed to the decreased significance of the director.

By contrast, the director was of utmost importance in thirty-five millimeter filmmaking. Phanuphan's support for the thirty-five millimeter industry was to a large degree aimed at

facilitating the rise of the director as “auteur.” That attitude was more in line with international attitudes that the director had ownership over the film, and in part reflected the international outlook of men like Phanuphan. The approach also asserted film as an artistic rather than purely commercial product. It also was a clear reject of the sixteen millimeter system, which was highly dependent on the draw of celebrities rather than the artistic merits of the films.

But Phanuphan, as well as Anuson Mongkhonkan and others, nonetheless asserted that sixteen millimeter film production should be given protection. This inclusion, however, was premised on the idea that if filmmakers were given the right environment in which to make films, they would inevitably transition to thirty-five millimeter filmmaking. As Anuson Mongkhonkan argued in his own letter, “I see that it is appropriate that filmmakers of the sixteen millimeter type should receive consideration for assistance as well at this time, such that filmmakers and theaters that use sixteen millimeter will be able to transition by themselves to the thirty-five millimeter standard.”⁴⁵¹ Like Phanuphan, Anuson Mongkhonkan acknowledged that only three companies were consistently producing thirty-five millimeter films, namely Hanuman Films (owned by Rat), Lawo Films (owned by Anuson Mongkhonkan), and Atsawin Films (owned by Phanuphan). Although the three men took a tempered approach to sixteen millimeter filmmakers, the ideal model was based on their own studios. Eventually, they all argued, the government should only support thirty-five millimeter production.

Phanuphan also addressed an issue that continues to plague the contemporary industry, and that has proved an enduring problem for Thai filmmakers. He noted that domestic audiences had distinctly different preferences than international audiences. Domestically, sixteen and thirty-five millimeter films were equally popular. The main difference favoring sixteen

⁴⁵¹ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

millimeter films was that in provincial markets, by far the most profitable for domestic films, the theaters lacked the technology to show thirty-five millimeter films. In Bangkok, where the theaters were well equipped to show thirty-five millimeter films, the theaters owners favored foreign films, often because they had a contract with a foreign company. Boonrak described the situation produced by powerful theater owners and American contracts:

Since the 1960s, for example, the MPEAA had the Siam Entertainment Company as its main link, while the WDP forged a similar relationship with the Hollywood Film Company. These two Sino-Thai-managed companies were the leading theater operators in Bangkok, together running a few dozen of the most profitable first-run theaters in the city. Due to their longstanding American connection, in 1976 the two firms were merged into the Pyramid Entertainment Corp. (PEC), making their position even stronger. The MPEAA and WDP chose to deal with these theatrical chains in a form of “joint venture.”⁴⁵²

Thus, thirty-five millimeter films, due to the Thai cinema environment and lack of audience preference for certain technologies, were caught in a sort of “no man’s land.” They were too advanced and not sufficiently profitable to be shown in provincial theaters, and couldn’t compete with foreign films in Bangkok.

Internationally, the only Thai films that could be accepted at international film screenings and festivals were those made with thirty-five millimeter film. But the filmmakers able to make films of *sakon*, or international, quality, were still very few, and lacked domestic support. To address the limited opportunities for showing Thai films abroad, Anuson Mongkhonkan suggested that the government take broad steps to address the issue, including diplomatic “cultural exchanges” and co-productions. For both Phanuphan and Anuson Mongkhonkan, Japan provided an enviable example for how an Asian country might break into international markets. Anuson Mongkhonkan discussed in detail the number of Japanese films that won international film awards in any given year. They also noted that Japanese films were well regarded around

⁴⁵² Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 192.

the world, and therefore provided a useful example for Thai cinema's potential. Japanese films, it seems, proved that Asian films could compete internationally.

Furthermore, Phanuphan complained, the various duties and tariffs placed on the film industry made it very hard to continue working and make a profit. The Thai government placed tariffs and taxes on a range of film activities, from import duties on equipment (including thirty-five millimeter film) to entertainment taxes at theaters. On the one hand, this increased the costs of production for domestic filmmakers, particularly those who wanted to work with the more complex and expensive equipment needed for 35mm film production. On the other hand, it made cinema owners risk adverse. In Bangkok, this meant that foreign films were most commonly screened, as they were the most likely to turn a profit. In the provinces, sixteen millimeter features starring the biggest celebrities were the main draw.

Responding to these varied challenges, Phanuphan suggested four main changes, specifically the institution of a quota system, targeted tariffs aimed at foreign films, the gradual encouragement of thirty-five millimeter style production, and the creation of a filmmaking association. While not all of the suggestions were immediately achieved, they shaped the debate about how the government should support the film industry. First, regarding the quota, he suggested that all theaters would be required to show a set number of Thai films on a weekly basis. Rat also agreed, and referenced examples of Thailand's neighbors, including India, Burma, Japan, Pakistan, and Indonesia, who already had quota systems in place.⁴⁵³ In this suggestion, Phanuphan focused almost exclusively on Bangkok's first run theaters. These theaters seemed to be the cinemas that Phanuphan thought would be most successful for thirty-five millimeter productions to screen. He made no similar suggestions for provincial theaters. Specifically, the

⁴⁵³ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

filmmakers suggested that first run theaters cumulatively be required to show between twelve to fifteen Thai films per week.⁴⁵⁴

Second, he suggested that the government dramatically lower tariffs on film equipment, especially that used for thirty-five millimeter production, and remove taxes on cinema tickets for Thai films. Instead, tariffs on imported films should be raised. By 1963, the Thai government taxed film production and exhibition in a range of ways. Boonrak noted that “from 1947-1977, [with the government] claiming that film-going was a “luxurious” activity, film admission tax in Thailand was set at a flat rate of 50 percent of the price of each ticket sold.”⁴⁵⁵ However, import tariffs on foreign films were generally low, in 1959 coming to about US\$10 per feature.⁴⁵⁶ Thus, foreign films emerged as a steady and low-risk way for cinema owners to make a profit despite high ticket prices.

Adding to this, imported equipment was taxed at high rates. Film stock cost about twice what it did in the US or Europe. The filming equipment required for 35mm production was likewise made unaffordable through taxation. And even if filmmakers did manage to produce something, they still had to send the prints abroad for processing. Upon their return to Thailand, they would once again be subject to customs duties.⁴⁵⁷ Ultimately, Boonrak observed, “the Thai government gained US\$26.95 million in 1974 through collection of tariffs, censorship fees, business taxes, municipality charges, income taxes, profit remittance levies and admission duties. This accounted for as much as one-third of the box-office gross for that year, US\$81.80 million.”⁴⁵⁸

Third, Phanuphan focused on the various domestic exhibition practices that, in his

⁴⁵⁴ NA ๑๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

⁴⁵⁵ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 185.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 185.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, 189.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, 211.

perception, negatively impacted thirty-five millimeter filmmaking. The first practice was narration. Phanuphan suggested that live narrators were a risk for filmmakers, since their practice of deviating from scripts violated the government's censorship rules. Added to their role in distracting from the director's vision for the film, narrators were fundamentally negative influences for Phanuphan. He argued that, while the government should consider the need for narrators to make a living, they should be gradually phased out of the industry.

Rat and Phanuphan also recognized the threat that television presented to the film industry. Rat observed that in countries where television was already strong, filmmakers had had to make changes.⁴⁵⁹ Phanuphan went further, and suggested that television films were not adequately censored, and therefore presented a danger to youth morality. He argued that television films should be more rigorously censored and, when involving foreign films, subject to tariffs. Like Phanuphan, Anuson Mongkhonkan gave no indication that he was opposed to Thailand's system of censorship. His only criticism, and one that was echoed by Phanuphan, was the high fees required to submit a film to the censorship board. Both filmmakers advocated lowering the fees significantly, or abolishing them altogether. Anuson Mongkhonkan, however, included that caveat that if fees were abolished, they should be maintained for any foreign films submitted to the board.

To enforce all of these suggestions, Phanuphan asserted his fourth suggestion on the need for a filmmaking association. He suggested that the American model of the Motion Picture Producers Association provided the best example. In that system, he argued, the association could regulate its own members and therefore more strictly control the quality of the industry. Where filmmakers deviated, the industry could penalize them accordingly. It is intriguing that he

⁴⁵⁹ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

would suggest this model, even as the role of the MPAA and major film studios in regulating the American industry was breaking down.

The filmmakers' suggestions, from tariffs to quotas to greater censorship, revealed a highly conservative and protectionist approach to the film industry. To a large degree, the reforms would benefit only a very select number of filmmakers. By his and others own admission, the changes would only benefit three existing studios. The changes would not necessarily make it easier for filmmakers to break into the industry, but rather make it easier for those already involved in making films. As part of this strategy, the changes would not support any style of domestic filmmaking, but only those that conformed to the "international standard." At the same time that his proposals ignored the plight of most domestic filmmakers, they were also explicitly anti-foreign. Even as he suggested modeling a Thai filmmaking association on the American example, he asserted the need to decrease the market share of foreign films. Indeed, he directly stated that the intended impact of a quota and import tariff would be a decrease in the number of foreign films playing in Thailand. None of these suggestions was based on market forces or perceived demands of Thai audiences. Indeed, as Phanuphan himself acknowledged, audiences either had no preference for a specific style of filmmaking, or, in Bangkok, preferred foreign films. The changes served only to address the grievances of a select few.

Furthermore, the filmmakers' ideas were largely based on ideas of progress and modernization. In Rat's letter, he began by noting the ways in which Sarit's policies towards industry had led to progress and improvement.⁴⁶⁰ The men repeatedly used development discourse, such as *charoen* (develop), to describe the impact of their proposed changes. Moreover, their almost obsessive focus on technology was linked to international conceptions of cinematic progress and modernity. Thai cinema could not enter the international, modern world

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

of filmmaking without reforming as an industry along technological lines. The very use of the word industry (*utsahakam*) to describe the sphere of filmmaking emphasized those developmental and technological priorities. Indeed, other spheres of artistic endeavor, such as literature or other visual arts, felt no need to be classified as industries. The debates and tensions between industry and art were unique to the film industry.

These opinions were, by and large, reflected in the at least eleven meetings that followed the formation of the council. The main issues that came up in the meeting were the extent to which the government should take a role, whether through aid or enforcement, the use of quotas, tariffs, and technological barriers, specifically regarding sixteen millimeter film. The members were far from agreeing on how to approach the varied issues, or even on what to discuss first. Oftentimes, the disagreements cut across industry lines, with the filmmakers, businessmen, and officials each arguing a different approach. But even within those categories, the members disagreed. Rat focused on introducing a quota system, noting that if the government couldn't help in that regard, "there was no point to further debate."⁴⁶¹ Prince Phanuphan, as in his letters, returned again and again to the issue of sixteen millimeter filmmaking.

All of the members agreed on the challenge facing the domestic industry from foreign competition. To a large degree the different subjects, from quotas to import fees, revolved around the issue of foreign competition. Discussions of quotas, for example, observed that of the twenty-four first-run theaters in Bangkok, just two, Chaloem Krung and Empire, showed Thai films throughout the year. Some, like Metro Theater, refused to show any Thai features at all.⁴⁶² A quota system was intended to guarantee a stable market for Thai productions, thereby removing the stigma of Thai films as risky investments. But foreign films were also seen as

⁴⁶¹ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

⁴⁶² NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

threatening influences on the moral behavior of Thai youths, especially men. As Prince Phanuphan noted, Eastern men were susceptible to sexual influences much earlier than Western men, with Thai men lusting after women as early as age fourteen.⁴⁶³ Therefore, Western films in particular needed to be controlled to suit the social control of the Thai citizenry.

As for foreign Asian films, the members also agreed that Japanese increasingly presented a new challenge to the domestic market. But Japanese films were also generally admired by the members, as was the way that Japanese cinema had gained a positive international reputation and broken into the American market.⁴⁶⁴ Mainland Chinese films, on the other hand, were associated with Communism, and the threat of Communism within the Sino-Thai and Bangkok Chinese communities.⁴⁶⁵

The meetings also reveal a notable rift between producers and exhibitors. Cinema-owners were perceived by many of the members, especially the filmmakers, as first and foremost interested in profit, and therefore favored foreign productions. So when the members were discussing reforms to the system, they were often conceived in ways that circumvented the control of exhibitors. For example, when discussing how a quota system might work, Rat advocated for formal legislation and enforcement, noting that “If we were to use requests of the exhibitors (*phuak rong*) it would have no benefit, because the exhibitors have never supported (us).”⁴⁶⁶

As Boonrak summed up the attitude of the TMPPA, “they blamed the individual exhibitors, particularly those within the highly concentrated theatrical circuits in Bangkok and the major provincial centers, of being ‘unsympathetic, money-hungry, exploitative capitalists’

⁴⁶³ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

⁴⁶⁴ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

⁴⁶⁵ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

⁴⁶⁶ NA ๙๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3] Other members of the council, specifically Prem, advocated for trying a more “harmonious” approach first.

who did not care about the future of ‘Thai culture.’”⁴⁶⁷ Those tensions would come to a head after the 1977 tariff raise. Ultimately, however, a quota was recognized as unenforceable, primarily because there were simply not enough Thai films to sustain one, as well as the fact that such a move would upset exhibitors. It was Prince Anuson Mongkhonkan who proposed the eventual solution, raising the film import tariff such that less foreign films would come into the country.⁴⁶⁸

In their discussions, the council members accepted and demonstrated a fundamental relationship between government, art, industry, and cultural life. They spoke of government support as if it was entitled to them as productive citizens of the nation. Moreover, they asserted film as a national good, in need of nurturing and oversight in order to produce something that the nation could be proud of. As Rat argued, government support for film would have positive effects on the international reputation of Thailand. He wrote that government support would allow Thai films to screen abroad and “promote the culture and life of the Thai nation to make other countries more familiar with Thai people.”⁴⁶⁹ Thus, he asserted the role of film in promoting national cultural values abroad as part of Thailand’s broader international diplomatic and cultural exchange efforts.

Moreover, these types of demands would have been unthinkable even a decade or so previously. Certainly the calls for official government support were relatively new in filmmaking circles, only coming from the 1950s onwards. This change in attitude is linked to two further changes. First, it was contingent on the rise of a mass film industry and the anxieties amongst Bangkok’s educated and cultural elite that it provoked. Second, it relied on a changing role of government in people’s lives. The specific policies that were proposed in the 1960s and

⁴⁶⁷ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 206-207.

⁴⁶⁸ NA ๔๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

⁴⁶⁹ NA ๔๕ 0701.10.15/2 [3]

eventually took root in the 1970s were determined by the changes brought by rapid development and the expansion of government in Thailand.

However, the political landscape in Bangkok was suddenly shaken in December 1963, when Sarit suddenly died from cirrhosis of the liver. As I discussed in chapter three, his death was quickly followed by scandals concerning his mistresses and the dispute over his fortune. Sarit's chosen successor, Thanom Kittikachorn, began his regime with the promise to follow Sarit's agenda. Shortly after the transition, the government propagated the idea of *prachathipatai baeb Thai*, or "Thai-style Democracy." Thanom was never able to achieve the cult of personality that Sarit had managed. Instead, as Thak observed, "What Sarit had conveyed by personal charisma the government now attempted to project by disseminating what can almost be called the doctrines of Sarit-ism."⁴⁷⁰ The continuity in policy included the focus on development and modernization.

In 1964, while the film industry was recognized according to the "Act of the Promotion of Industries," it was not given eligibility for government financial support. The reason given for this was that the production of films was not yet considered to be of international standard.⁴⁷¹ At that point, many elites and politicians in Bangkok still held a negative or ambivalent view towards domestic filmmaking. As many of this class of people were those likely to see foreign films themselves, it is hard to imagine that they would be eager to institute measures to increase the numbers of Thai features and decrease foreign films. Nonetheless, the Act gave the industry some amount of legitimacy, and ultimately proved a stepping stone to further reform.

Reform also came from inside the industry. The establishment of the TMPPA in 1967 was intended to instigate progress within the industry. It appears that the association did have

⁴⁷⁰ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*, 227.

⁴⁷¹ Dome, *History of Thai Film*, 44.

some immediate impact. Before 1967, only 1 to 2 thirty-five millimeter films were produced per year, but after that year the number increased to 3 to 4.⁴⁷² Much like the 1963 council, the TMPPA was led by the three major production companies Hanuman, Atsawin, and Lawo.⁴⁷³ While several other trade unions developed in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Film Directors' Club of Thailand, the Artists Association of Thailand, and the Professional Performers Association of Thailand, the TMPPA was eventually the most successful in achieving government support.⁴⁷⁴

The influence of the TMPPA was in part because the associated filmmakers were primarily drawn from the ranks of newly urbanized bourgeois class or low-level royals. However, with the exception of Prince Chatrichaloem Yukon, it is the former group that became most prominent from the end of the 1960s onwards. Benedict Anderson identified the development of a "bourgeois strata" in the 1960s as part of a right-wing reaction to American influence and social upheaval.⁴⁷⁵ In fact, a popular nationalism could be found at the time that took forms of a leftist or liberal movement on the one hand and a conservation faction on the other. Largely the products of modernization programs and educational expansion under Sarit and Thanom, the members of this new class represented the ability for progress within the family and upward social mobility.⁴⁷⁶ However, at the same time that this class reaped the benefits of modernity, they also increasingly questioned the costs to society and the moral degradation brought by American influence.⁴⁷⁷

The bourgeois class was particularly susceptible to government and royal conceptions of

⁴⁷² Ibid, 45.

⁴⁷³ Patsorn, *National Cinema*. 101-102.

⁴⁷⁴ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, "Political Economy," 206.

⁴⁷⁵ Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," 49.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, 60.

Thai national identity and culture, especially the concept of “Nation-Religion-King.” In fact, they became what Anderson called the “popular” allies of the aristocratic and bureaucratic elite, a result of “a growing general awareness that they are no longer genuinely hegemonic, and of the real fear and hatred generated by the cultural revolution of the 1970s.”⁴⁷⁸ As so-called leftist elements began to take over after 1973, as well as with the economic downturn accompanying the global economic crisis and beginnings of American withdrawal, this urban class increasingly blamed the student groups, labor unions, and influences of democracy for the social upheaval and economic troubles of the time. In this way, the bourgeois class accepted the October 6, 1976 massacre of students at Thammasat University by the military and conservative elements despite the unprecedented public nature of the violence.⁴⁷⁹

The alliance between the urban bourgeois, bureaucratic elite, and aristocrats or minor royals was already apparent in the film industry. Whereas previously the royal elite had been happy to pursue filmmaking as merely a hobby, once the bourgeois strata entered into filmmaking as a professional activity, the market needed to be shaped to address their interests. Thus, mass filmmaking only became a real problem when it was perceived to intrude on the ability for “professional” filmmakers to control the market. The prevailing mindset of modernization and internationalization contributed to understandings of what it meant to be a professional. The standards of international film festivals and use of latest film technologies became the defining features of quality filmmaking. But the demands of bourgeois and elite nationalism also meant that foreign competition and the threat of foreign morality were viewed with increasing concern. The demands made by filmmakers from the 1960s onwards were entirely the product of shifting social dynamics, economic relations, and nationalism in the Cold

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, 75.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, 171.

War period.

While filmmakers and government officials sought a way to improve the industry through state regulation, changes also came from unexpected places. In 1966, in the course of producing a documentary on the Fifth Asian Games, Tae Prakadwuttisan discovered the availability of thirty-five millimeter film labs in Hong Kong, which presented a far cheaper alternative to having films produced in the United Kingdom.⁴⁸⁰ Combined with the creation of the TMPPA, a transition began as the film industry moved towards thirty-five millimeter production. By 1972, almost all films were made of that standard.

The change was inspired in part by the major success of two Thai films in 1970, *Monrak luk thung* (Magical Love in the Countryside) and *Tone* (A Man called Tone).⁴⁸¹ Like so many other films of the 1960s, *Monrak luk thung* starred Mitr Chaibancha and Phetchara Chaowarat. A musical comedy and romance, the film was so successful that it stayed in theaters for six months. The film showed what was possibly when the celebrity formulas of the sixteen millimeter age were showed in higher quality formats. It also proved to be one of the last films made starring Mitr and Phetchara together. Shortly afterwards, Mitr died while filming a helicopter stunt for the film *Insee Thong*. Phetchara continued to make films on a less frequent scale until 1979, after which she retired due to blindness caused by the bright lights on the film sets. The sudden death of Mitr and gradual retirement of Phetchara closed the chapter on sixteen millimeter era celebrity pairings. As for *Tone*, produced by Piak Poster, the film would go on to inspire a movement of socially activist filmmaking in the 1970s. That style of film would take over from the “putrid” films of the sixteen millimeter era.

⁴⁸⁰ Chalida Uabumrungjit, “Cinema in Thailand to 1970,” in *Film in Southeast Asia, Views from the Region: Essays on Film in Ten South East Asia-Pacific Countries*, ed. David Hanan (Manila: SEAPAVAA and Vietnam Film Institute, n.d.), 104.

⁴⁸¹ Rangsi Thatsanaphayat, *Monrak Luk Thung (Magical Love in the Countryside)* (Rungsuriya Phapphayon, 1970); Piak Poster, *Tone (A Man Named Tone)* (Atsawin Phapphayon, 1970).

In addition to those changes, the government began to finally deliver on promises of support. In 1969, the government granted the Thai film industry the right to seek government investment. However, in order to be eligible companies had to have significant capital investment funds and were required to make films using thirty-five millimeter. Many companies and filmmakers lacked the means to qualify for this, so the change initially only affected a small portion of the industry. The same three companies Hanuman, Asawin, and Lawo were, once again, the only three initially eligible.⁴⁸² Undoubtedly, new promises of support, as well as the commercial success of domestic thirty-five millimeter films led contributed to technological shifts in the industry. By 1972, almost no Thai films were made in sixteen millimeter format.⁴⁸³

In 1969, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, at the directive of the Prime Minister, conducted an extensive study of the domestic film industry, importation of foreign films, and steps the government might take to improve the industry. Complete with extensive statistical information and descriptions of all aspects of the industry from production to distribution, the study represents the fullest information available on the film industry in the 1960s. The study also compared the Thai industry with other Asian countries, including Japan, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. As with other studies or discussions of the industry, the 1969 study focused on development objectives. The point of the study, the authors wrote, was to examine opportunities for the film industry to develop and progress (*charoen kao na*).⁴⁸⁴

But government interest in supporting the industry was not merely for the benefit of industry workers. As the authors wrote,

⁴⁸² Dome, *History of Thai Film*, 45.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 48.

⁴⁸⁴ Ministry of Economic Affairs, *Report of the Research Committee on Thai Film Production and the Importation of Films to Thailand (Rai Ngan Khana Kamkan Suksa Ruang Kansang Phapphayon Thai Lae Kan Nam Phapphayon Tang Prathet Khao Ma Nai Prathet Thai)* (Bangkok: Ministry of Economic Affairs, 1972), introduction.

Aside from saving foreign currency that is lost to foreign films, we could also send Thai films abroad for distribution or screening. It would be a source of revenue for the country and form of promotion for foreigners to know more about Thailand. Aside from this, in the support for the production of documentary films, the government may use the films in order to give the people knowledge about different issues and induce people to work with the government to solve various problems and for the development of the country.⁴⁸⁵

Again, the government made it clear that it considered films to be a tool in broader efforts to foster national sentiment, influence citizen's behavior, and promote the international image of the country. This approach was very much in line with Sarit's style of government, as well as the use of propaganda in Thailand during the Cold War more generally.

The study also revealed biases in government toward domestic cinema. According to the study, members of the Thai film industry could be classified into three broad groups: 1) Filmmakers who owned their own studios, which were stable, as well as their own equipment. They also had experience and knowledge about filmmaking; 2) People who worked in specific occupations, such as casting directors or cinematographers; and 3) Amateur filmmakers who were not seriously interested in film and lacked the appropriate skills, but wanted to make money and would leave the industry at their first failure.

Of the first group, the study concluded that only Atsawin, Lawo, and Hanuman qualified. The list excluded filmmakers such as Dok Din Kanyamal, despite his long years spent in the industry and many successful films, as well as the fact that he owned his own film company. Either than were not yet making films in thirty-five millimeter, or they were not seen as legitimate artists. Of the second group, the study estimated that there were only about twenty people.⁴⁸⁶ The vast majority of those in the film industry were grouped into the third category. The categories impacted the role of director more than anyone. Directors were, at least implicitly, expected to be attached to and make films with the structure of a studio.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, ๑.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, 28-29.

This classification reveals the institutionalization of a class bias towards the film industry. It also evidenced the attitude that certain characteristics defined a “professional” rather than “amateur” filmmaker, especially class, education, and use of quality equipment. Great emphasis was placed on formal training in filmmaking (including all specific aspects of film production), use of TMPPA approved equipment and thirty-five millimeter film, and access to sufficient capital (several million baht) to cover the costs of production. These classifications formed the backbone of what types of film production would eventually be eligible for government support, but were so restrictive that they applied only to a very limited group of filmmakers. These restrictions were aimed at the mass film industry and intended to rid the country of low-quality productions.

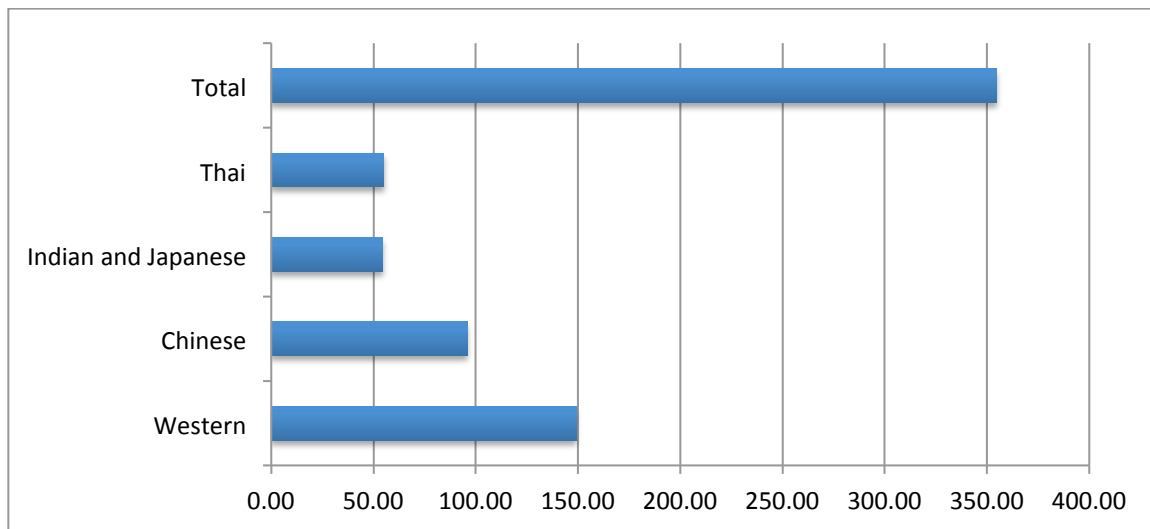
The study also noted the unequal import-export dynamics of the industry. There were very few opportunities to send Thai films abroad. Apparently, only Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia provided consistent markets. Even then, Cambodia had recently stopped importing Thai films. In Hong Kong and the United States, individual films were sometimes sold as “Chinese films.”⁴⁸⁷ Similarly, Thai films had limited success with international film festivals. The authors recalled the success of *Santi-Vina*, noting that even the Soviets and Communist Chinese purchased copies of the film.⁴⁸⁸ But the failure for Thai films to continue that success was blamed on sixteen millimeter film production. Intriguingly, the authors also noted that the tradition of films based on novels (*phapphayon prophet nawaniyai*) did not find a market abroad. The authors argued that not only was the story already not of international standard by the time it reached the filmmaking stage, but also that foreign audiences would not be interested in those

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid, 48.

films.⁴⁸⁹ The observation seems to indicate a belief that domestic stories writ large were only popular domestically.

As shown in Figure 4.1 below, Hollywood films were the most popular in Bangkok. Western-held film festivals were the most highly regarded by filmmakers, with the exception of those held in Japan. But in comparing strategies for development national cinemas, the authors of the study most closely examined the cases in Japan, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. These case studies were chosen in part due to the categorization of certain Asian nations as developing. It wasn't only that the countries had strong film industries. India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand were also the emergent economics of the "Third World." Japan, meanwhile, provided the model for capitalist and industrial development in Asia, as well as one of the few Asian cinemas to break into the national scene.



*Figure 4.1 National Origin of Films shown in Bangkok First-Run Theaters per 100 Seats (1969)*⁴⁹⁰

But the great challenge of foreign competition remained. While the government had

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, 49.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

made some token efforts to support the industry, the independence of cinemas and major draw of foreign films meant that the TMPPA continued to lobby for greater protections. Continued pressure culminated in a dinner, which opened this chapter, at the Montien hotel in August of 1970. After a series of speeches by leaders in the film industry and bureaucrats, Rat appeared on stage as the last to speak. But he only managed a few words, before he collapsed. A few hours later, he had passed away, the result of a heart attack. Just 62 years old, Rat had devoted the better part of his life to making films and trying to solve the riddles of the domestic Thai film market. He had apparently given up filmmaking after *Namtan mai wan*, out of hopeless frustration with the industry. Unfortunately, in terms of regulation, his greatest impact would come only after his death.

Quickly after this event, the Thai government responded by designating the film industry as a protected sphere. The cremation volume put together to honor Rat is full of recollections from civil servants with whom he was acquainted through his long years of lobbying for support. The Minister of Economic Affairs recalls the day that Rat showed him around his studio, where he explained all of the film equipment and showed him Rat's documentary film *Thamajak*. Afterwards, Rat hosted the Minister to a lunch at his family home.⁴⁹¹ They included veteran filmmakers, like Prince Anuson Mongkhonkan, Prince Phanuphan, and Mani Wasuwat, as well as industry newcomers, such as Choed Songsri. Prince Anuson Mongkhonkan, who recalled Rat as a beloved friend, wrote that he was "The only person on the earth who could see Thai film 'step forward,' (*kao pai khang na*) instead of just sitting quietly or fall behind (*thoi lang*)."⁴⁹²

While some of the contributions from officials took on a rote tone, Choed Songsri shared a story that aptly describes why Rat holds such an important place in the history of Thai cinema.

⁴⁹¹ "Rat Pettanyi: In Memorial (Rat Pettanyi Anuson)" (Thai Motion Picture Producers Association, 1970).

⁴⁹² Ibid.

In 1970, Choed had only been making films for a few years. His first film, *Nora*, came out in 1966, and became one of the greatest hits of the sixteen millimeter era. He would then go on to study filmmaking at UCLA and train at Burbank Studios. But Choed recalled a series of meetings between himself and Rat at an early stage in his career that proved inspirational. Choed wrote that,

At the time that I was making “Nora,” which was my first film, I had organized “Nora Day” at the meeting hall at Thammasat University. Khun Pitsamay Wilaisak dance the manora-buchayan. I needed to film it, and required significant lighting. I therefore went to rent a lamp from Hanuman Films.

“You organized it the production to make merit, correct?”

The man asked me. I answered that:

“All of the income will be donated, Sir. But I will take the opportunity to make a film as well.”

“You’ve just started. Making a film requires a lot of capital. Do you have a lot of capital?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Then I will help you...”

And then that man called over Khun San Pettanyi, his brother, to get the lighting for me for free.

Choed went on to recall multiple times when Rat allowed Choed to rent items from Hanuman studios for free, like a dolly which would otherwise have cost ฿5,000.

Rat Pettanyi was undoubtedly a uniquely skilled filmmaker who understood the role of film form and technology in producing films. He was also an astute businessman to be able to build a film business in spite of the long odds imposed by transnational market realities and an extractive state policy. But as Rat and other elite filmmakers and members of the TMPPA were trying to reform the film market according to the ideologies of the time, they were also attempting to meet the near impossible demands of both mass market success and film festival standards of quality.

On the one hand, during this period, the tensions between quality and popularity in the domestic industry emerged for the first time. The 1963 meetings make it evident that by that

point a standard had emerged that Thai films should be both commercially popular as well as of high enough technological and artistic quality to qualify for international film festivals. That most Thai films failed to achieve this was not blamed on the intrinsic contradictions between the demands of film festivals and those of the domestic mass markets, nor on the differences in spectatorship patterns that defined mass Thai film going. Instead, amateurish practices, economic greed, unsupportive state policy, and foreign exploitation were blamed. Thus, only “professional” filmmakers supported by state policy in a carefully regulated market offered the solution to the contradictions of the competing markets.

On the other hand, the modernizing ideologies that drove conceptions of the role of the state in people’s lives allowed filmmakers to focus on the role of technology in producing quality. It also allowed the filmmakers to re-conceptualize filmmaking as a state “industry” in need to progress and development. Thus, the state of the film industry became a barometer for the state of Thailand’s national development more broadly. Once filmmakers and bureaucrats had designated a national cinema, the threat of foreign competition became more discernable and concerning. Even as Thailand entered the “American Era,” American cultural products were increasingly suspect. Furthermore, the new understanding of a Thai “national” cinema set the stage for the socially active cinema of the 1970s, and eventually for import reforms that led to a four-year Hollywood boycott of Thailand.

CHAPTER 5

HOTEL ANGEL: GENDER, CLASS, AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE FIRST NEW WAVE

“If we don't help preserve Thai identity, what will we use to demonstrate “Thainess”?”⁴⁹³ –

Choed Songsri

Choed Songsri's seminal 1977 film *Phlae kao (The Scar)* opens with a raucous village celebration.⁴⁹⁴ As villagers play music, sing, and dance. Onlookers enthusiastically clap to the rhythm of folk music. The scene is reminiscent of many village celebrations throughout central Thailand. The villagers themselves are likewise dressed in familiar central Thai fashion. Elevated, thatch huts further contribute to the familiarity of the scene. A sign informs viewers that the location is Bang Kapi District, a small district in the capital region on the fringes of Bangkok district. Choed juxtaposed this scene with the above quote as a rallying cry for the protection of a Thai identity. From what did Choed want to protect Thai identity? It is likely that Choed's call was in part influenced by the troubled years of political turmoil that climaxed in the events of 1973 to 1976. It also came at a time when the government was considering drastic protectionist measures for the domestic industry that would, by the end of 1977, end with the Hollywood boycott of the Thai market. Those moves were influenced by popular anti-Americanism after decades of intervention and dramatic socio-economic change.

Throughout the course of his career, Choed used film as a way to meditate on and propagate his understanding of Thai culture. In doing so, his work was very much of the First New Wave (*khluen luk mai*) generation of Thai filmmakers that came to dominate Thai cinema in the 1970s. First New Wave films used contemporary political and social issues to convey

⁴⁹³ “*Tha rao mai chuai kan raksa ekalak khong Thai, rao ja samdaeng khwampenthai duai sing dai.*”

⁴⁹⁴ Choed Songsri, *Phlae kao (The Scar)* (Choedchai Production, 1977).

nationalistic messages and propagate an increasingly urban bourgeois image of the Thai cultural citizen. Piak Poster's 1970 film *Tone*, set the stage for the First New Wave style. Set in contemporary Thailand, the film was shot with the latest film technologies and surprised audiences with its controversial plot highlights. That combination, familiar settings, technological advancement, and social activism, would characterize the First New Wave movement. These films were therefore understood by the filmmakers, as well as audiences and the Thai state (which both supported and censored many of these films), to have social and political importance and influence in the emerging public sphere that accompanied a greatly increased participation in Thai political affairs and engagement with the state.

However, like the *nam nao* films, First New Wave directors used melodramatic love stories or sexual encounters of rural Thais. They conveniently spoke central Thai, which Bangkok audiences would understand and would act as a bridge to help those audiences identify with the characters. While born in different parts of the country, the filmmakers were generally educated in the United States, often at top tier film schools, and lived and produced their films in central Thailand and Bangkok. This was the case with Prince Chatrichaloem Yukhon, who was studied filmmaking at UCLA, where he apparently shared film courses with Francis Coppola and Roman Polanski. Indeed, during this period the ability to run a successful film business, pursue filmmaking as a career, and have access to film technology was by and large conditional on possessing the financial means to do so, as the government support programs for domestic filmmaking were still in their infancy and inclined to support existing professional film companies.

First New Wave films were indicative of a larger tension in Thailand from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, often referred to as the *samai patthana* (development era). At the heart of the

tension was how the relationship between Thai people and the land informed national identity. With increasingly rapid urbanization, industrialization, and agrarian development, pre-existing social categories based on land-based livelihoods were re-imagined in ways that privileged elite interpretations of national identity and sociopolitical hierarchies. These conceptions of the national community became rhetorically powerful in the Thai film industry and visibly dominant on the screens of Thai cinemas across the country. Consequently, film was a vital medium through which a reimagining of the Thai national political and social arena occurred. But it was also a site in which the contradictions of a national identity were apparent.

Filmmakers like Piak, Choed, and Chatrichaloem created a style of filmmaking in which they inscribed the threat of modernity to the Thai nation on the bodies of the films' rural poor characters. In this respect, the filmmakers reflected a common feeling amongst the Thai elite and middle-class; that is, serious ambivalence towards the entire project of development and modernization that Thailand had pursued with great rapidity and with the financial and military assistance of the United States. Even as their motivations and the specifics of their ambivalence differed, in general the pattern became most evident in depictions of the Thai countryside. The filmmakers presented highly romanticized images of an agrarian utopia populated by innocent peasants at risk of defilement if they had too much contact with the West, modernity, or politics. In doing so, they obfuscated the benefits that modernity brought to other segments of the population- notably Thai elites and the filmmakers themselves - as uneven industrialization restricted the improvement of living standards to certain segments of the Bangkok core.

By the time that the First New Wave gained momentum, Thai cinema was for many of the social and intellectual elite a national embarrassment, as well as emblematic of broader concerns regarding Thai national identity. Attitudes toward domestic cinema paralleled the

popular sense of lethargy that characterized the Thai political and economic atmosphere.

Different segments of the Bangkok elite had separate reasons for their aversion to domestic cinema. Nonetheless, their dislike created some commonality. In general, *nam nao* was used for films that were technologically backward in their use of sixteen millimeter stock and culturally unsophisticated due to their appeal to rural and lower class Thai people. It was against this class of *nang nam nao* that First New Wave filmmakers developed their films.

Two major film movements dominated filmmaking during the 1970s, namely “Art for Life” (*sinlapa phuea chiwit*) and the First New Wave.⁴⁹⁵ The Art for Life movement was derived from the social realist project, which sought to draw attention to the everyday lives of Thailand’s poor and critique social hierarchies. Many of these films were adaptations of novels from the same movement. Their themes centered on rural life and the impact of development on social relationships. *Thongpan* (1975) remains one of the best known of this genre of cinema.⁴⁹⁶ First New Wave, meanwhile, also used realism and didactic juxtapositions between the rural poor and urban excess. However, they advocated nationalistic rather than revolutionary themes. Prominent films of this style include Choed Songsri’s *Phlae kao* and Prince Chatrichaloem’s *Khao chue kan*.⁴⁹⁷ In both movements, realism was used to portray different versions of an authentic Thailand and to deliver political messages through cinema. The filmmaking of the late 1970s and early 1980s represented a high point in the shift from the 1950s that resulted in an aesthetic regime in which didactic representations of rural lives were tied to the ongoing struggle for Thai national identity.

Thus, the two movements represented a shift in filmmaking that included the social and political landscape of the country in domestic films. They also forcefully politicized commercial

⁴⁹⁵ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1992,” 82.

⁴⁹⁶ Phaijong Laisakun et al., *Thongpan* (The Isan Film Group, 1976).

⁴⁹⁷ Prince Chatri Chaloem Yukhon, *Khao Chue Kan (His Name Was Kan)* (Lawo Phapphayon, 1973).

cinema. However, to do so they utilized a style of narrative filmmaking that presumed a passive audience. The filmmakers paid careful attention, for example, to narrative continuity and smooth editing. The changes in narratives styles were complemented by changes in the architecture of modern theaters that reinforced the switch from active to passive viewing behaviors. Throughout the country, particularly in urban and provincial centers, the darkened and air-conditioned theater occupied by a silent audience became the ideal. These changes fundamentally altered the relationship between filmmaker, text, and audience in Thai cinema. The participatory and interactive character of earlier cinema was replaced by a paternalistic approach.

For these reasons, *Plae kao* was emblematic of the changes in Thailand's Cold War film industry that I have highlighted thus far. Choed himself benefitted from the Thai-US alliance, particularly by his education in the United States. In an earlier era, he may have gone to the United Kingdom or stayed in Thailand. Instead, he went to Los Angeles, where he was exposed to filmmaking. The experience also drove Choed's search for Thai social and cultural authenticity. His search led him to the village, much like the US and Thai governments in their psychological warfare programs. *Plae kao*, made in part from experience gained in the United States and using the latest film technologies conforming to international standards, asserted a conservative social vision, where Thainess was defended through the sexual decisions of a woman and by rejecting the influences of the West.

Choed began filmmaking during a tumultuous time. By 1970, the Communist Party of Thailand had established a small, but sufficiently strong presence in the country, especially along the border with Laos. Various other disputes troubled the country's borders, such as the emerging Islamic separatist movement in the south. There is broad consensus that while these issues were troubling, they never seriously challenged the security of the Thai state. They did

cause substantial concern within the government and sociopolitical elite. At the same time, the Nixon Administration was intent on negotiating an end to the conflict in Vietnam, and all signs pointed to an eventual withdrawal of the US from the region. Already US troop levels had fallen since their peak in 1969.

By 1970, despite efforts by TMPPA to improve industry standards, the state of domestic cinema appeared for many beyond saving. Praphat reportedly said, “I don’t like to watch Thai movies... [T]hey make me feel embarrassed.”⁴⁹⁸ This was true as well for many filmmakers. In response, the TMPPA and a select group of filmmakers sought to create a new national cinema based on high cinematic quality. In doing so, they produced a new set of standards on which Thai films would qualify as legitimate artistic productions.

The transition in industry attitudes went hand in hand with changing aesthetic and narrative styles that impacted the experience of spectatorship and the socio-political symbolism of film viewing. Previously filmmakers like Rat Pettanyi focused on technical aspects of filmmaking and foreign competition. Those in the 1970s also emphasized aesthetic features and socially engaged content. The shift to thirty-five millimeter production was essentially finished by 1972, but perceptions of low-quality domestic filmmaking continued. Filmmakers increasingly turned not only to naturalistic styles, but simultaneously became concerned with the realism of the stories themselves. Many of the films of the sixteen millimeter era had offered escapist experiences depicting mythical kingdoms, historical dramas, or musical romances. But with the 1970s, filmmakers used the setting of contemporary, familiar domestic spaces to depict the lives of everyday Thais.

To do so, Thai cinema turned in particular to rural landscapes and village communities. These were the same sites deemed of cultural and geopolitical significance by the Thai

⁴⁹⁸ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 218.

government and elite, as well as the United States.⁴⁹⁹ May argued that it was part of a “broader cultural and ideological break [that was] distinguished by its idealization of an exemplary rural way of life, imagined as a life of simplicity and egalitarian cooperation and its appropriation of folk forms for the creation of committed arts and literature.”⁵⁰⁰ Filmmakers, then, were concerned with rural landscapes primarily as they reflected human relationships and social values. In general, earlier sixteen millimeter films used indoor studio sets and placed little emphasis on broader geographic or social settings. But with the end of the 1960s, Thai films moved outdoors.

Contemporaneous to the “New Wave” movement, the “Art for Life” (*sinlapa pheua chiwit*) movement used “social realist” aesthetics to make art socially and politically relevant for the masses. The philosophy also had an impact on film production.⁵⁰¹ This movement was led by a generation of educated youth, many from rural backgrounds but educated in Bangkok, who experienced a sense of cultural displacement. While that displacement compelled them to write “for the masses” in opposition to the Thanom government, their positioning as intellectuals led them to use language and references aimed more towards their own group than the actual masses.⁵⁰² Indeed the educated backgrounds of the men associated with the “cinema for life” movement paralleled those of the New Wave.

Both groups explicitly rejected the *nam nao* films and asserted the importance making a “quality” cinema that utilized “social realism” techniques. May argued that the use of aesthetic realism in New Wave films was an appropriation from cinema for life. It was utilized for commercial purposes rather than political mobilization, resulting in what she called “an ethical

⁴⁹⁹ Harrison, “The Man with the Golden Gauntlets,” 211.

⁵⁰⁰ May Adadol Ingawanij, “Transistor,” 82.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid, 83.

⁵⁰² Ibid, 3-84. Anderson, “Introduction to In the Mirror.”

aesthetic at best, rather than a realist strategy.”⁵⁰³ Contemporary Thai New Wave film is a legacy of the first New Wave period in the bourgeois appropriation of the “rural” as a coping mechanism for cultural disruption and assertions of Thai identity. May observed that during the authoritarian period:

The impoverished northeastern region of Isan became articulated as a sign of authentic Thainess, a countercultural acknowledgment of its history of ethnic and political marginalization. By the same token, Bangkok became a disenchanted sign of exploitation and cultural degradation, marked by its delights in Americanized mass entertainment, hedonism, and consumption.⁵⁰⁴

With both the left and the right reinterpreting the village and Bangkok as symbolic of Thai authenticity and development excesses, respectively, the ideas entered the mainstream.

Yet if the Thai middle-class/bourgeois rose to be the economically dominant class in Thailand, then it still lacked the cultural and creative capital to make it the culturally dominant class. The middle-class had yet to assert a cultural product that was entirely or even mostly its own. Instead, they have appeared to instead act merely as a site of interaction and mediation between external and local forces. Ironically, between those forces, it is the “rural” that has most clearly retained its cultural capital, and thus its motifs and norms have been elevated as a dominant cultural force. Even as the mainstream depictions of rural life are idealized, it remains that these so-called plebeian cultural forms are the most popular and successful to date, contrasting with the hollowness of middle-class conceptions.

Meanwhile, Thai filmmakers saw themselves as representing the ideals of international cinematic professionalism. Choed Songsri exemplified that movement in key respects. Choed worked within the politically and socially legitimated establishment of Thai cinema, having been educated at UCLA film school and trained at Burbank Studios. He owned his own studio,

⁵⁰³ May Adadol Ingwanij, “Transistor,” 87.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid, 82-83.

Choedchai. He was involved in the partnership between the Thai Ministry of Economic Affairs and the TMPPA to develop programs for government support for the domestic film industry since the 1960s. His seminal film, *Phlae kao*, was made with significant domestic backing and, once released, earned the highest box office revenue of any Thai film up to that date.⁵⁰⁵ *Phlae kao* also went on to win international film awards in 1981, thereby obtaining global recognition and legitimation. Both filmmaker and film were the very image of quality cinema advocated by the TMPPA and Thai government.

Indeed, the 1970s New Wave directors like Choed Songsri rejected provincial and rural audiences as their primary demographic in favor of Bangkok and international audiences. In an interview with *Rom* magazine in 1974, Choed, while discussing his perspective on government support for the film industry and what steps needed still to be taken, asserted that:

[The government] should help find markets outside of the country. The government has many methods to achieve this, for example quota exchanges with foreign countries, support for participation in competitions, or joint productions.... When Thai films enter the foreign market, producers will aim to make films for the large market (meaning the foreign market) instead of the provincial market (*talat ban nok*) as they do at the present moment. When we reach that moment, the quality of Thai cinema will rise to the international (*sakol*) standard.⁵⁰⁶

His attitude was similar to critics of Thai cinema who saw provincial and rural film consumption as an obstacle for the film industry to overcome. It also highlights the tension in 1970s film between practice and content. Films were expected to be produced by educated professionals using modern equipment and to meet *sakon* standards of quality that moved away from the Thai provincial market. But those same films also used rural landscapes for nostalgic, romantic displays of national ecology, and tradition.

The beginnings of the New Wave are typically attributed to Piak Poster's 1970 film *Tone*.

⁵⁰⁵ Tadao Sato, "In Memory of Cherd Songsri, the Great Master of Thai Films," *ThaiCinema.org*, accessed July 12, 2016, <http://www.thaicinema.org/Essays09cherd1.php>.

⁵⁰⁶ Choed Songsri, "The Thai Film Industry," *Rom*, 1974.

Piak Poster started in the film industry painting film posters, thereby earning his last name. Even after his transition to directing, he continued to paint his own posters. Dome Sukwong identified 1970 as a pivotal year in the development of Thai cinema, primarily because of the release of *Tone* and the rural musical *Monrak Luk Thung*. The former was notable for its use of Isan *luk thung* music and its rural setting. But *Tone* engaged much more substantively, and critically, with aspects of the urban-rural divide. The lead character, a young man named Tone, is an orphaned temple boy. But after he saves a visiting man from Bangkok, Aod, from bullying, Aod invites Tone to live with him in Bangkok. There, Tone is able to pursue his studies. He also is awed and impressed by city life. Bangkok youth culture is embodied by Aod's beautiful sister, Daeng, who enjoys modern music, dates various men, and wears the latest Western fashions, including miniskirts. These consumer items and modern, urban cultures are portrayed as liberating and fun.

But Daeng is captured by some gangsters, who have a vendetta against Tone. They take her out of the city, and into the countryside, where they get into a shoot-out with Tone. The landscape highlights the dangerous and hostile feeling of the moment. One of the gangsters rapes Daeng after Tone fails to rescue her in time. But the pair eventually escape, and are finally able to be together. For Tone, Daeng's assault has no negative impact on their relationship. The film broke all of the conventions of mainstream Thai films, from settings to gender norms. In *Tone*, the film set the standard for a major trope in 1970's filmmaking, where young male college graduates underwent a rite-of-passage to find their true purpose.⁵⁰⁷ Critically for the film industry, the two films, *Monrak luk thung* and *Tone*, were produced with high standards of production quality and in thirty-five millimeter film. The production of these two films, as well as the deaths of Rat Pettanyi and Mitr Chaibancha, all in 1970, heralded a new era of film

⁵⁰⁷ May Adadol Ingawani, "Hyperbolic Heritage: Bourgeois Spectatorship and Contemporary Thai Cinema" (PhD, University of London, 2007), 137.

production. But it also saw continued development of the state in Thai cinema.

After the breakout success of *Tone*, Piak continued to produce numerous films, most of which combined critical success with popular appeal. After 1971's *Duang*, Piak released 1972's *Chu*, which was discussed in chapter three. A comparison of rape in the two films begs some interesting questions. The rape against Daeng was off-screen, and only somewhat alluded to. It was clearly an act of unwanted violence. But rape was critical to the plot of *Chu*. Not only the actual act, which was shown more extensively, but also the way rape figured significantly in Riam's conceptions of loyalty. There is little evidence to explain these differences. But they indicate a complex relationship between femininity, urbanity, and autonomy in Piak's films. Furthermore, the isolation imposed by the island in *Chu* contrasts with representations of urban life in *Tone*. In fact, Riam's isolation almost seems to contribute to her passivity. But in *Tone*, the possibilities, for good or bad, are more open.

Many themes in *Tone* and *Chu*, including female autonomy, male coming-of-age, and the liberties of urban life, are also evident in Piak's 1976 *Wai Olawon*.⁵⁰⁸ The film's main character, Tam, is living in Bangkok, where he moved from Phetchabun, in order to study at university. To earn money, Tam tutors the daughter, O, of his landlord, Met. But after a gossiping neighbor tells O's father, Met, that Tam is preying on O, Met forces the tutoring to stop. But Tam knows that O is a lazy student, so he continues to tutor her in secret. Through the years, the relationship becomes romantic, in large part out of defiance of Met. Even as the pair's incompatibility is apparent, they stay together. For example, O looks forward to attending Tam's college graduation dance, but Tam simply gets drunk at the party and cannot dance. Nonetheless, the two are married. But Met is shown to have the last laugh, when O reveals to Tam that her father taught her how to control the family money, and that Tam is on a tight allowance. O's portrayal

⁵⁰⁸ Piak Poster, *Wai Olawon* (Fai Star, 1976).

is distinctive, as she is clearly shown to have decided her future independently, and in defiance of her father. Whether or not her decision was wise, it was her decision. Her control of the finances after marriage, furthermore, engages with the traditional role of women as in charge of family finances. That depiction is enforced by the depiction of O's mother, who does most of the day-to-day work in running the family's landlord business. When Met wants to kick Tam out of the community, the mother steadfastly refuses. Piak clearly showed the woman as controlling events, with the men reduced to petty trickery and small victories over each other.

In certain respects, Piak's style, and the depiction of urban youth culture in *Tone*, marked a specific point in the rapid development in the 1960s and 1970s. Through the 1960s, the number of migrants to Bangkok, whether for work or for education, expanded exponentially. Likewise, the number of tertiary students rose dramatically. These changes had important implications for popular hopes of social and economic mobility, if not necessarily for real mobility. University degrees were viewed as a pathway to social mobility and financial security. The universities became symbolic for many of the promises of development and progress. No matter the origin of one's parents, the next generation might expect unprecedented opportunity.⁵⁰⁹ Students were not only dreaming of a future in the bureaucracy, but also more radical futures. Inspired by revolutionary authors like Jit Phumisak and movements led by students, feminists, and farmers, amongst others, students moved to the forefront of 1970s activism. For example, students went out into the countryside to work with farmers' groups or community development projects in rural villages. At times, their efforts were little more than superficial demonstrations of urban presumptions at knowing what was needed by villagers. In other cases, students and farmers, as well as "workers, slum dwellers, teachers, and others" worked together to imagine a social and

⁵⁰⁹ Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," 58.

political transformation.⁵¹⁰

Contemporaneously, some hopeful developments for political opening and some level of democracy were seen during the period in which *Tone* was produced. In June 1968, the military introduced a constitution that, even as it institutionalized military control and made the Prime Minister and cabinet appointment-only positions, did allow for some elected seats in parliament and partly legalized political parties.⁵¹¹ In February 1969, the first general elections in eleven years were held. The civilian opposition party, led by Seni Pramoj, was particularly popular in Bangkok.

But even those small signs for optimism began to vanish with late 1970 and into 1971. The promises of urban development and progress gave way to little real growth for most of the country. In the cities, bureaucratic positions were increasingly difficult to come by. University graduates had a difficult time finding employment. From a social perspective, the older generation found their children coming home not only with changed fashions, but also with different political, moral, and social ideas.⁵¹² Then, in November 1971, the Thanom-Praphat clique overthrew the government, citing concerns about a growing communist insurgency. But it was primarily the result of disorganization and factionalism within the military.⁵¹³ Over the next year, the regime constructed another constitution. In December 1972, the news came out that it would mandate an entirely appointed Assembly, the vast majority of which would be drawn from the military. In response to the news, thousands of students began to publicly protest. The constitution proposal was withdrawn.⁵¹⁴

Likewise, in the countryside there was growing discontentment. In large part, this was

⁵¹⁰ Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted*, 84-85.

⁵¹¹ *Thailand Fact Sheet (1932-1976)* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), 6.

⁵¹² Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," 59.

⁵¹³ J. L. S. Girling, *Thailand, Society and Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 188.

⁵¹⁴ *Fact Sheet*, 7.

because those living in rural areas had largely been left out of the nation's rising economic fortunes. While the population boomed, rice productivity remained relatively low. From a 1943 population of sixteen million, the population had more than doubled to forty million in 1973.⁵¹⁵ And while cultivated acreage increased during that period, the yields from the land did not. So when the extents of acreage development were reached, but the population continued to grow, landlessness and tenancy became greater problems.⁵¹⁶ And then, in 1972, a severe drought followed by flooding cut rice output by ten percent and corn by forty percent. With continued international demand for rice, prices rose and urban areas experienced shortages.⁵¹⁷ Furthermore, growing income inequality made it clear that the vast majority of the benefits of development and industrialization were going to Bangkok. As the comparison below shows, as city wages increased substantially, incomes of farmers saw much less change.

Year	Per capita income of farmers (in Baht) (A)	Per capita income of city people (in Baht) (B)	A/B (%)
1960	1,044	6,434	16.2
1970	1,310	8,618	15.2
1975	1,433	10,061	14.2

*Table 5.1 The Growing per Capita Income Gap of Farmers and City People in Thailand*⁵¹⁸

After everything, the economy took a hit, with rising inflation reaching fifteen percent by 1973.⁵¹⁹ Clearly, the promises made by the Thai government and the US through programs like the USIS units, had proved false.

⁵¹⁵ Hans Ulrich Luther, *Peasants and State in Contemporary Thailand: From Regional Revolt to National Revolution?* (Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1978), 12.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid, 11-12. Looking at these problems regionally, Luther wrote that “landlessness is most acute in the North, tenancy in the Central Plains, and indebtedness in the arid Northeast, while in the South there are extensive settlements of “illegal” land use, and many people perform low-paid plantation work.”

⁵¹⁷ Girling, *Society and Politics*, 188.

⁵¹⁸ Luther, *Peasants and State*, 14.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid, 13.

The state and Bangkok elites were also concerned about the regional situation in which Thailand was embedded. Communist insurgencies continued against governments in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. But the US was clearly withdrawing from the region. First, troop levels were reduced, although they remained high. Aid levels, both for development and for the military, was not as high as the peak between 1967 and 1969, but was still substantial. Thailand could not continue to rely on the US, at least not in military terms. In so many ways, then, the “boom” of the 1960s was over. As both Anderson and John Girling pointed out, the implicit acceptance of authoritarianism in exchange for material development was over. The growing discontent with developmental policies and the urban-rural divide were central to the plots of Thai films produced in the late 1960 and early 1970s. One of the most notable filmmakers to depict these issues in films was Prince Chatrichaloem Yukhon. While Piak Poster inaugurated the new technologically and stylistically progressive cinema, Chatrichaloem introduced film as a form of direct social criticism. Chatrichaloem was in a privileged position to make that sort of film. First, he was a member of the royal family. Second, he was the grandson and son of respected filmmakers. He came from a line of filmmakers, including his grandfather Prince Yukhon Dikhamphon and uncle Prince Phanuphan Yukhon. His father, Prince Anuson Mongkhonkan, was also a filmmaker and founded the studio Lawo Films, with which *Khao Chue Kan* was made. He studied at UCLA, where he majored in geology and minored in film studies. Chatri’s position not only enabled him access to film equipment and knowledge of film production, especially according to international styles, but it also shielded him from the censure of both the government and the market.

Those factors were certainly at play with the production of *Khao chue kan*. The film, based on a story by writer Suwanee Kuhontha, told the story of a young, poor doctor, Kan, who

was committed to serving a small rural community in Phitsanuloke. Kan brings his Bangkok society wife, Haruthai, out to the countryside to live with him. Although her mother, friends, and jealous ex-boyfriend, Tomon, doubt her ability to survive without city luxuries, Haruthai initially follows Kan with a cheerful attitude. But Kan becomes consumed with his work, which causes him serious challenges stemming from the community's isolation, environment, and corruption by officials. Haruthai feels increasingly abandoned, and temporarily returns to Bangkok. However, after a car accident caused by Tomon, Kan goes to Bangkok to rekindle their affair. Unfortunately, Haruthai cannot remember him. Angered at her relationship with Tomon and failure to remember their own romance, Kan assaults Haruthai, and the act triggers her memories. Haruthai remembers her love for Kan and rejects Tomon at last. Tragically, however, when Kan returns to the village, he is fatally shot by a gambler. Although the police and local *kamnan* did not personally carry out the act, they are implicated in it.

The depiction of corrupt and murderous policemen and government officials was highly controversial. As Chattri himself said in a 1993 interview,

Dr. Khan is the first film ever made in Thailand about the [D]epartment of [I]nterior. You see, when you look back at it, it doesn't seem like much. But at that time we were under the iron fists of General [Praphat Charusethian] and Prime Minister [Thanom Kittikachorn]. Censorship was really strong. But nevertheless all the police, all the "interior" were actually politically corrupt. You make this film for the first time and it passed the censor. It set up a new trend.⁵²⁰

But the film didn't pass the censors easily. As Anchalee Chaiworaporn noted, Chattri needed to meeting personally with Thanom to secure approval for the film. Chattri later recalled that "*Khao*

⁵²⁰ Chatrichaloem Yukhon and Thomas Richardson, Chattri Chalerm Yukol, December 14, 1993, <http://web.archive.org/web/20041206033903/http://people.cornell.edu/pages/ter3/thaifilm/ccyint.html>.

Chue Kan had problems with the censors from the very beginning because this was the first movie about the issue of corruption out into the open. I had to show it to Field Marshal Thanom and ask him rather bluntly: ‘Is everything in this movie wrong?’”⁵²¹ But even after Thanom apparently gave his approval, the film only had a limited release in Bangkok.

The film only showed nationally after the overthrow of Thanom’s government in October 1973. After the military arrested ten student activists on October 6 for handing out flyers, thousands turned out to protest the government and demand a constitution. Not only motivated by the actions of the government against the students, many of the protesters came out because of the government’s obvious corruption, as well as the worsening economic situation. Ultimately, the demonstrations attracted somewhere in the realm of 500,000 people, many from Bangkok’s middle class. Although the government seemed to back down, on October 14th, police fired on some demonstrators. Protesters responded with violence, which in turn led to a full military response. The military seized Thammasat University. At least 65 people were killed, and hundreds wounded. But on October 15th, Army General Krit Sivara refused further repression, apparently the result of factionalism with the regime. King Bhumibol also allowed people to flee into the palace. Thanom and Praphat were forced into exile.

An interim government was appointed, and a draft constitution begun. At last, Thailand seemed to have returned to democracy. And indeed, there were some hopeful signs. Farmers and workers demonstrated for labor rights and reform of land policies. In some cases, censorship declined. Artistic expression flourished in ways that were previously not possible, especially in terms of political and social criticism. As I discussed in chapter three, people also tried to implement change with regard to women’s rights, particularly in terms of labor rights and family

⁵²¹ Anchalee Chaiworaporn, “Thai Film and Politics,” *ThaiCinema.org*, accessed July 12, 2016, http://www.thaicinema.org/Essays_06politics.php.

law.

However, the post-1973 governments struggled to maintain stability, and received plenty of criticism from both the left and the right. The challenges faced by the governments were serious. First, the 1973 global oil crisis contributed to continued economic decline. Second, elections in January 1975 and again in April 1976 failed to produce stable ruling majorities, which diminished their abilities to enact reforms. Third, although the government successfully negotiated a final withdrawal of American forces from their bases within Thailand, one of the few successes of the period. However, the communist insurgency continued to strengthen. The threat of the domestic insurgency was heightened with the victories of communist forces in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in 1975. Laborers, intellectuals, and students turned to the left, and saw the government as too slow to institute meaningful reforms. Meanwhile, the professional urban middle class, concerned about the threat of communism and alienated from the student activists, increasingly moved right.

But people's positions were far from black and white. Ambivalences and tensions characterized the period. This was clear in filmmaking as well. Beginning in 1974, films produced entirely with the democratic period began to appear. One of the most famous was Prince Chatrichaloem's 1974 *Theptida rongraem* (Hotel Angel). The film directly tied the suffering of prostitutes to the problems of military rule and Westernization. The film's main character, Malee, in key respects represented arising contradictions in who constituted the Thai middle class. James Ockey pointed out that prostitutes are uncomfortable characters for the middle class, as they may earn income to merit inclusion (and often earn more than salaried officials), but do not occupy positions fulfilling the professional and moral qualifications.⁵²²

⁵²² James Ockey, *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 156.

Originally from a rural farming community, Malee was coerced into prostitution. A man convinced her to run away with her, claiming to love and want to marry her. But once they arrived in Bangkok, he abandoned her to a brothel. No longer a virgin and convinced that she was now shamed beyond reparation, Malee becomes a prostitute. But after becoming quite successful and earning large sums of money, Malee was able to afford many of the material markers of the middle class, such as a transistor radio and new stylish clothing.⁵²³ She was also able to send money home to her family, who were able to build a new modern home, thus showing Malee's dedication to fulfilling her moral debt to her parents. Indeed, Malee took some pride in her relative autonomy and ability to support her family.

Yet not all women reacted in this way. One young girl who was forcefully brought to the brothel refused to become a prostitute, even as she was beaten. Images of the pimps beating up the woman were juxtaposed with flashes of images from the October uprising and violence against students. Finally, the woman jumps off the roof, preferring to die than prostitute herself. While *Khao chue kan* relied on implication and webs of intrigue, *Theptida rongraem* went straight to the point: urban violence, prostitution, and consumption were all bound up in the problems of society under the dictatorship. In his portrayal of urban prostitution and Malee's character, Chatrichaloem used sex and sexuality to critique the agenda of the authoritarian state, but also reinforced aspects of a gendered moral order.

Describing the female characters in *Theptida rongraem*, Prince Chatri outlined the different characters that he sought to show:

In The Angel we have three girls. One girl, all you have to do is give her one smack and she's willing to be a prostitute. She said it's better than working in the fields. Another girl, you have to beat her up quite a bit before she's willing to be a prostitute. And the last one,

⁵²³ May Adadol Ingawanij, "Transistor," 85.

the third girl, no matter what you do she won't be a prostitute. She'll jump down, kill herself, but you can't change her. So, we have three types of girls. Like Malee, you know, you have to understand one word: KARMA--like in the film *Kama*. Thai people actually believe in karma. They believe that whatever happens to you in this life, it is a result of what happened in the last life.”⁵²⁴

While Chatri may have been depicting a sort of realism, the documentary film *The Struggle of Hara Factory Workers* (1975) evidenced a different reality for women workers.⁵²⁵ Through the 1970s, women were active and influential in the student movements, labor strikes, and other areas of reform and protest. Produced by Jon Ungpakorn and supported by the Six University Professors' group, the documentary followed a strike by women at the Hara clothing factory from December 1975 to March 1976.⁵²⁶ As Kobkua remarked, “The Hara (Thailand) Blue Jeans Factory workers' strike, lasting five months, and their genuine effort to produce and distribute their products during the strike, earned the girls a unique place in the history of lab[o]r disputes in Thailand.”⁵²⁷ The women working at two of the company's factories had previously labored under appalling conditions. As the women described and the camera showed, the dormitories were uninhabitable. Inadequate and expensive food, charged out of the women's salaries, was the only kind available. Women worked for illegally substandard salaries without any benefits. Some of the workers were underage. However, the owner of the factory was very wealthy, in part because the clothing produced at the factory was sold for high prices.

Finally, the women went on strike and formed demands for better pay and working conditions. They worked with the Labor Department to negotiate a contract with their employer.

⁵²⁴ Chatrichaloem Yukhon and Richardson, Chati Chalerm.

⁵²⁵ Jon Ungphakon, *Kan to Su Khong Kamkon Ying Rongngan Hara (The Hara Factory Workers Struggle)*, 1975.

⁵²⁶ Sudarat Musikawong, “Gendered Casualties,” 183.

⁵²⁷ Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, “Thailand in 1976,” *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1977, 253.

However even when a workable contract was signed, the employer violated it. The Labor Department did nothing to help. So the women occupied the factory. Again, the state failed to assist them. The employer paid off police to harass them, and the employer vacated the factory, taking the equipment along with him. At this point, however, the women did something remarkable: they established a factory collective and sold off shares to collect capital for the required equipment. They began to sell clothing for reasonable prices, all the while adequately paying the women and maintaining decent working hours. Whereas a pair of jeans was previously 180 baht, they were lowered to 85 baht. Meanwhile, the women's daily income doubled.

The film showed the women during this time, busily working with banners such as "Laborers will create a new world" above them. Leftist labor music was played over these scenes, linking the strike to a broader movement. The women also talked about other protests and campaigns elsewhere in the country. One woman talked about how, after hearing about farmer struggles in Loei province, they sent clothing to help keep the people warm. The strike was one part of a larger struggle, although one for which the women paid dearly. They spoke of harassment by police and gangs, neglect by the government, and opposition to their activities by their families.

Unlike in fiction films, the documentary style allowed the women, as much as possible given film editing, to speak for and represent themselves. In fact, the style of the film was poor, mainly characterized by poor picture and sound clarity, as well as choppy editing. It lacked the stylistic fluidity of Prince Chatrichaloem's films. Perhaps this is why the film is less commonly remarked on, despite the incredible events that it depicts. But unlike *Theptida Rongraem*, which generally creates passive and conservative roles for the women, *Hara* credited women's

intellectual and physical work in helping to build labor consciousness in Thailand. What is further remarkable about the film is its sense of optimism, even in the face of institutional opposition to the cause at the center of the film. As one of the women admits, their lawsuit is a high risk strategy. If the employer lost, they would be fined just 1,000 baht. But if the women lost, they would go to jail. The woman explains that “Prison is only for poor people. No wealthy person would go to jail.” The film nonetheless ends with several of the women singing a song in support of the labor movement, as the women vow to fight on.

Perhaps the better known leftist film produced during the democratic period, at least in intellectual circles, is *Thongpan*. The fictive documentary-style film is based on real events. In 1975, Mike Morrow, the film’s producer, was working with the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and went on an assignment to cover a seminar organized to discuss the United Nations Mekong Development Scheme and an associated dam planned for the Mekong River. Present at this seminar were some farmers, who were invited to give voice to the people potentially affected directly by the construction of the dam. One of the farmers was named Thongpan and, like his filmic namesake, he had been displaced by a different dam project and had since been moving from place to place in search for work with his family. During the seminar, Thongpan’s wife died, after which Thongpan disappeared with his children. Although the other seminar participants attempted to find him, they never did.⁵²⁸

After this experience, Morrow decided to tell Thongpan’s story on film and recruited a group of young Thai students to make it. The music was provided by Caravan, a folk music group that inspired the “music for life” (*phleng phuea chiwit*) style associated with the art for life movement. Khamsing Sinok, the famous social activist writer, was involved in the script writing,

⁵²⁸ Norman Peagam, “Thongpan,” in *From October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976: Bangkok and Thongpan’s Isan*, ed. Charnvit Kasetsiri (Bangkok: Munnithi khongkan tamra sangkhommasat lae manutsayasad, 2006), 169-171.

having previously been involved in the original seminar.⁵²⁹ Common villagers from the set location portrayed the various characters in the film, while students, intellectuals, and a few politicians played the seminar participants.⁵³⁰ By the time of filming, however, the optimistic spirit of post-1973 had been overtaken by violent tensions and anxieties between pro-democracy and rightist elements. According to a member of the crew, one major incident occurred when waiting for a train to Bangkok,

We attracted the usual crowd of curious passers-by, but one guy in the back caught my attention. I could see he was holding an automatic rifle and suddenly felt the whole atmosphere in the station change. People had stopped talking and there was tension in the air. He came up to the front of the group without saying anything and stood about five meters away from me, pointing his gun between my eyes. He seemed a bit drunk and angry. Then he cocked the gun. He stood like that for a while until finally the station master appeared, quite scared, and said to us, "I think you'd better come in and pick up your tickets now." Then the man fired, right between our heads. He fired a couple more times and also threw a small plastic bomb, scattering shrapnel and concrete around. The man was arrested later and we found out he was an off-duty policeman. We felt this incident was meant to be a warning from the police.⁵³¹

Threats such as these, as well as even more serious cases of violence and assassination, increasingly were used by right wing elements to intimidate supposed or actual leftist individuals and groups, including artists, intellectuals, politicians, and activists, amongst others.

Indeed, the promises of activism and the activists themselves were under violent threat. In the north and especially around Chiang Mai, farmers and activists faced assassination and harassment. Anthropologist Tyrell Haberkorn recorded that

In total, between March 1974 and September 1979, thirty-three farmer leaders were assassinated, eight were seriously injured, and five were disappeared. At the height of the assassinations, between March and August 1975, twenty-one FFT [Farmers' Federation

⁵²⁹ Khamsing Sinok, "Discussing the Origins of Thongpan (Bok Lao Khwam Pen Ma Khong Nang Ruang Thongpan)," in *From October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976: Bangkok and Tongpan's Isan*, ed. Charnvit Kasetsiri (Bangkok: Munnith khongkan tamra sangkhommasat lae mautsayasat, 2006), 145.

⁵³⁰ Peagam, "Thongpan," 173.

⁵³¹ Ibid, 174-175.

of Thailand] leaders were killed.... The assassinations of farmers were committed openly and seemingly without fear of consequence.⁵³²

It was a violent reaction against the threat that revolutionaries and activists posed to the entrenched elite and status quo. The assassinations of farmers' leaders also served as brutal evidence of the shallowness of rural nostalgia and romantic depictions of the countryside in propaganda and commercial film. Unlike the simplistic and passive farmers of those films, the FFT demonstrated rural knowledge of the law and the ability to mobilize. The alternative future imagined by rural students and farmers was violently crushed, and replaced instead by the romanticized ideal of Bangkok. Even as audiences would go on to weep for the melodramatic tales of poor villagers, a collective forgetting of the real problems confronting villagers and farmers had already begun.

Finally, on 6 October 1976, the Thai military used the specter of the communist threat to justify an attack on student protestors at Thammasat University and once again seize power of government through a coup. *Thongpan* was banned before it could ever be screened domestically. Almost everyone involved in the film fled either to different countries or to the jungle region of eastern Thailand. However, the film showed outside of Thailand, including at the London Film Festival where it won the "Outstanding Film of Southeast Asia" award.⁵³³ It continued to play before audiences in the United States, Europe, and Australia, where it became a much-used text in groups associated with Southeast Asian studies.⁵³⁴ *Thongpan* returned to Thailand in 1978, after the reinstitution of civilian rule. But even then, a public security office

⁵³² Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted*, 106.

⁵³³ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *From October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976: Bangkok and Tongpan's Isan* (Bangkok: Munnithi khongkan tamra sangkhomasat lae manutsayasad, 2006), 140.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid*, 141.

(*santiban*) observed the first screening.⁵³⁵ Since then, the film is mainly popular amongst academics.⁵³⁶

After the coup against Seni's government in 1976, King Bhumibol appointed Thanin Kraivichien interim prime minister. Thanin, a prominent judge and president of the Supreme Court of Thailand, had during the democratic period become a member of the far-right Nawaphon movement. He also ran a television program, where he commonly denounced progressive movements and politicians. His appointment clearly signaled a return to social conservatism, as well as to the influence of the king, who would later appoint Thanin to the Privy Council. Thanin's government immediately cracked down on protest and reform in Bangkok as well as in the countryside. Many of the activists were further radicalized, and joined the Communist Party of Thailand in the jungle. Political parties were outlawed.

The reaction to the democratic period, therefore, was as much about culture and society as politics. In November following the coup, the Public Relations Department issued the following statement:

Our culture, upheld by our ancestors and customs, was neglected, considered obsolete and regarded as a dinosaur or other extinct creature. Some had no respect for their parents, and students disregarded their teachers. They espoused a foreign ideology without realizing that such action is dangerous to our culture and did not listen to the advice of those who have much knowledge of that ideology.”⁵³⁷

Much like Sarit, and indeed like contemporary governments, the Thanin government defined Thai social and political problems in cultural terms.

⁵³⁵ Sudarat Musikawong and Wimonrat Arunrotsuriya, “Interview with Phaijong Laisakun,” in *From October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976: Bangkok and Tongpan's Isan* (Bangkok: Munnith khongkan tamra sangkhommasat lae maitsayasat, 2006), 162.

⁵³⁶ Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Thongpan*, 141.

⁵³⁷ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 251.

The film industry, identified as a “national problem” by the Thanin government, took on new significance in the post-1976 period. Thanin himself admitted that he was “particularly concerned with the quality of Thai movies and their role in social development.”⁵³⁸ This phrase seems to put a spin on the word “quality” not just to imply technological or stylistic quality, as was the case in earlier discussions. Now, a film of “quality” was one that would produce the correct social effects. The government responded to the problem of cinema in two ways. First, the government renewed efforts at industry censorship. Films like *Thongpan* were banned. Authorities also specifically targeted film promotion in a regulation prohibiting pornography (broadly defined) from use in public advertisements. A policy adopted in September 1976 sought to monitor language used by live film narrators. After the 1976 military coup, the police department replaced the guidelines established under the Ministry of the Interior with four prohibited categories, including those films encouraging sexual abuse, depictions of cruelty against humans and animals, presenting political issues (domestic and international), and violating “established moral, cultural, and social values.”⁵³⁹

On top of concerns over domestic cinema, a cooled attitude towards the US, as well as right-wing nationalism provided an opportunity for the TMPPA to advance its position. In cooperation with the TMPAA, the government made its second move to deal with the industry when, in December 1976, it raised the import duty on exposed film from US\$.11 to US\$1.50 per meter. When combined with other changes (such as a 10% municipality charge), Boonrak estimated that this would amount to an average of US\$4,500 per film print imported.⁵⁴⁰ The move was largely intended to target all foreign films, but especially American ones, and provide an advantage to the production of domestic features. One of the major complaints about foreign

⁵³⁸Ibid, 266.

⁵³⁹Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, “Direction Unknown,” 60.

⁵⁴⁰Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 272.

companies, mainly Hollywood studio offices, was that through the popularity of the films and contracts with local theaters, Thai capital was being extracted from the country. Indeed, according to Boonrak's figures, in the year 1974, the film industry drew in an estimated US\$81.80 million in gross receipts. But through the 1970s, an average of US\$25 million went to foreign film distributors and television networks. On top of that, significant revenues went to the Thai government through fees and taxes. Again in 1974, US\$26.95 million went to the government. Thus, it appears that less than half of the revenue generated by films went to the production and exhibition sectors.⁵⁴¹

But given the climate of increasing censorship, it also seems that the change was driven by a desire to further limit the important of foreign cultural and political models. American soldiers had already been withdrawn from the country; now was the time to remove films as well. Boonrak also made this argument, finding that:

As soon as the T[h]anin regime came to power, the [TMPPA] took advantage of the acute crisis in the country by urging the state to become more active in engineering domestic filmmakers towards the right-wing ideology of 'nation, religion, king.' The TMPPA claimed that this could be achieved by limiting the number of foreign pictures entering the Thai market through either a quota system or a high tariff and by decreasing the traditional film admission tax of 50 percent to 10 percent. As a spokesman of the TMPPA put it:

The Government should use this media to develop our people, to explain, to persuade, and to educate through films. Developed countries all over the world use feature films to educate their people in the form of screen entertainment without letting their people realise that they are absorbing uncommitted knowledge and messages that film makers or their government lead them to believe.⁵⁴²

But of course, the members of the TMPPA stood to benefit, professionally and financially, from protectionist measures. Many surely also believed that films should promote certain perspectives on Thai cultural values. The various motivations, economic, prestige, and nationalism, were

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, 269.

⁵⁴² Ibid, 269-270.

intertwined. Much like the censors, filmmakers in certain positions stood to gain from the nationalist drumbeat.

The same could not be said for domestic exhibitors. Theater owners and distributors of foreign films were reliant on the consistent profitability of foreign films. When news of legislation on imported films arose, the exhibitors firmly opposed the move. In fact, their opposition did apparently have some success. While the bill ultimately placed a duty on imported films, the original proposal apparently also included an import quota. In a cable from the US embassy in Bangkok to the Kissinger in July 1976, the early life of the bill and domestic opposition was described through information from William Blamey, at the time the Thailand Manager of Twentieth Century-Fox and Columbia Films.

According to Blamey, this bill was proposed by Deputy Minister of Interior, Samak Suntharawet, acting on behalf of the Thai Motion Picture Industry, but that it recently was withdrawn as a result of opposition mainly from the movie houses which feared a drastic reduction in attendance if the import of foreign films were reduced. He said he has reported this to the Motion Picture Association of America....

To attempt to forestall an adverse decision, [Embassy official] met with three importers of U.S. films (Blamey, Boon Tun-Rakoman of Warner Brothers and Chana Charkykarana of Cinema International Corporation) on July 26 to formulate plans. These men, who hope to be joined by importers of non-American films, will draw up a petition addressed to the minister of finance listing the reasons why such an action would be harmful to Thailand, e.g., loss of tax revenue, etc. At that time embassy will render appropriate support.⁵⁴³

The emerging sides of the debate were quite clear. US interests allied with distributors and exhibitors, while the Thai government, particularly as it shifted to after the 1976 coup, worked with the TMPPA.

Finally, after decades of discussion and debate, the duty on imported film came into effect on December 24, 1976. The MPEAA responded with the statement that, “Regrettably, it is viewed that member companies of the MPEAA have no other alternative in the present

⁵⁴³ US Department of State, “Proposed Levies on Foreign Films,” US National Archives.

circumstances but to suspend further imports of foreign films.”⁵⁴⁴ The decision inaugurated a four-year boycott of the Thai market. It was a remarkable move. As Boonrak pointed out, alternative strategies included loopholes, which domestic distributors turned to, as well as changing price structures. But apparently the association was concerned that accepting the duty would have implications for other markets.⁵⁴⁵ Subsequently, Jack Valenti, the President of the MPEAA, sent a letter to Thanin appealing for a return to previous rates, and arguing that foreign films would not impact the development of the local industry.⁵⁴⁶

There was also widespread opposition to the move in the press. Certainly many of the Bangkok journalists would have been the target audience for foreign films at the top cinemas. Indeed, the opposition was widespread and strong. Boonrak found that “virtually all the English-language newspapers such as the *Bangkok Post*, *Bangkok World*, *Nation* and *Express*, and the Thai-language papers such as *Siamrath*, *Siamrath Suppada Wijarn*, *Matichon*, *Thairath*, *Daily News*, *Dao Siam*, *Ban Maung*, *Arhit*, *Kukhang*, among others, became deeply involved in the conflict at one point or another.”⁵⁴⁷ Kukrit Pramoj, for example, blasted the legislation in *Siam Rat*. In part, this was likely due to his rivalry with Thanin. But he also argued that foreign films, rather than hurting the domestic industry, helped to improve it by example and competition.⁵⁴⁸

Despite this, and even after Thanin’s own ouster later that year, the high import duty remained in place. Indeed, Thanin also created in Thai Film Industry Promotion Committee (TFIPC) in 1977. In a symposium held that year on film, the committee asserted that “films are closely related to the state of national stability [and] the government should thus devote more concerted attention to the make-up of the film industry, particularly at this time when our nation

⁵⁴⁴ Boonrak Boonyaketmala, “Political Economy,” 274.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, 275.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid, 275.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid 276.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid, 278.

is encountering manifold crises on many fronts.”⁵⁴⁹ This remarkable statement is one of the clearest assertions of film as a component of national security. That idea had previously manifested in bans on imports from anti-communist countries, and piecemeal against films from other countries. But the statement was clearly directed at the films of an allied nation. The Thanin government’s decision to promote domestic cinema and halt foreign imports marked the height of nationalist cinema in the Cold War period.

Subsequent governments, even those that did not support the legislation, did not remove it. In part, this was due to continued pressure from the TMPPA, which treated the issue as a matter of “national sovereignty.”⁵⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the issue brought criticisms from within government ministries. For example, the Finance Ministry attempted in 1978 to propose a series of policy alternatives, including replacement of the tariff with quotas.⁵⁵¹ At one point, General Kriangsak considered significantly reducing the tariff in favor of a quota system.⁵⁵² But those apparent alternatives still relied on the idea that the import of foreign films should be restricted. And for the next several years, first under the Kriangsak government and then under Prem, the rate was discussed and debated. But it was never revised. In part, this was likely due to the fact that, despite the MPEAA boycott, the rate raised significant revenue for the government. But perhaps the longstanding nature of the debate also diminished its importance. And certainly the significance given to it was likely limited to Bangkok. Many Thai were still able to watch American films, as exhibitions simply used old films or films that they had not yet shown before the ban. This certainly would have been true for provincial markets. The Prem government finally concluded that the issue lacked significance. Eventually, in May 1981, the MPEAA

⁵⁴⁹Ibid, 279.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid, 283.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid, 285.

⁵⁵² Ibid, 286.

removed its boycott without achieving any concessions.⁵⁵³

Domestically, the impact of the tariff was dubious. The number of distributors dropped dramatically. While before 1976s, somewhere around 200 small distributors brought most the films into the country. But by 1980, only six or seven remained. By 1983, the Sino-Thai “Big Four Monopolies,” including Apex Productions, Five Star Productions, Sahamongkol Films and Go Brothers, dominated the film market both in terms of production and distribution.⁵⁵⁴ The concentration of distributors impacted film production as well. In a return to the early period of film production in Siam, filmmaking once again became accessible only to the few with connections and money.⁵⁵⁵ Moreover, the tariff on imported films did nothing to alleviate the tax burdens on domestic film production and exhibition. Indeed, Boonrak argued that the TMPPA’s support for the tariff spent its political capital, and therefore could not be used for other policies targeted at domestic producers.

Amid these debates, Choed Songsri produced what is arguably his most famous film. Released on the 24th of December 1977, *Phlae kao* is the tragic love story of Riam and Kwan, two young villagers from feuding families in 1930s Siam. It was immensely popular both domestically and in 1981 became one of the first Thai films to win a major international award. In the beginning of the film, Riam and Kwan fall in love, but are prevented from being together by Riam’s family. Her father, an abusive alcoholic, sells her to a wealthy Bangkok lady.⁵⁵⁶ Riam is brought to her mansion, where the woman is struck by Riam’s resemblance to her own deceased child and adopts Riam as her own. Riam is pulled into the sophisticated lifestyle of elite Bangkok until the death of her mother necessitates her return to the village. This return is

⁵⁵³ Ibid, 294.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid, 307.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid, 307.

⁵⁵⁶ Slavery was gradually abolished under King Chulalongkorn between 1968 and 1905.

ill-fated, however, as it leads to a series of incidents resulting in Kwan being shot by Riam's wealthy Bangkok suitor. Riam seems to break out of a fog, and screams repeatedly that Kwan is her husband (*phua*). She swims to the place where Kwan's body floats, in the water near the isolated spirit house where the two used to secretly meet. Riam finds Kwan's body in the water, and stabs herself to death. The two lover's families gather around to stare at the bodies.

The film incorporates none of the characteristics so visible in sixteen millimeter era films, such as altered voices and disaggregated episodes, but instead follows the more typical narrative structure that had become dominant by 1977. It also shows more attention to the editing of the film, with gradual transitions and more logical scene transitions. The style of the film is far from one of the "cinema of attractions," and demands an immobile, silent audience. While *Phlae kao* likely did play in outdoor cinemas and traveling shows, the form of the film lends itself strongly towards a darkened, permanent theater experience with synchronous sound rather than live narrators.

Choed produced the film to address what he saw as important social issues in Thailand. While *Phlae kao* ostensibly depicts an earlier era, it is clearly critical of infatuation with Western ideas of civility and progress. The criticism would have strongly resonated in the 1970s context of development and American influence. The critique is notably in Riam's identity crisis between her sophisticated urban lifestyle and her rural past with Kwan. Kwan, meanwhile, falls into depression with the departure of Riam, and refuses his father's requests to ordain as a monk. In the end, both Kwan and Riam die, a conclusion that may be seen as the result of excessive influence from Western things and a refusal to maintain so-called traditional Thai ways. The didactic nature of the film strongly promotes a sort of agrarian, idealized "Thainess" that faces serious threat from Western influence and urbanization.

The spatial context of the film likewise resonated with contemporaneous concerns. The film is set in the verdant and visually pleasing backdrop of the Thai countryside and rice fields. This backdrop is crucial to the film's perspective on how human relationships with the land shape social structures and ways of life. A clear message of the film is that maintaining a livelihood connected to the land linked people to a timeless community and essentialized Thainess. It is for that reason that Riam's infatuation with urban, Western-influenced society is so offensive and why the only way she can be rehabilitated is to go back to the village, and ultimately die in the water that feeds the rice fields.

It was no coincidence that the rise of thirty-five millimeter, narrative style coincided with the rise of a genre of socially and politically engaged films. In *Phlae Kao*, as well as the film industry more broadly, a striking tension is visible in the desire for technological and aesthetic advancement and also a deep sense of rural nostalgia. So-called traditional rural life was depicted in *Phlae Kao* on advanced thirty-five millimeter film to urban Bangkok audiences viewing the film from the comfort of the modern film theaters. Also apparent is the sense of risk involved in progress and development as far as non-elite classes are concerned. There is the sense of urban society gazing at the rural masses as potential tragedies as they risk losing their traditional identities in the pursuit of Western-inspired progress and civility. In this sense, it is perfectly logical for film directors like Choed Songsri to use only the most advanced filmmaking technology as a marker of how developed the Thai nation is in order to capture a rural lifestyle that remains a symbol of how Thailand has not lost its traditional roots and identity.

After the beginning of the 1980s, however, the rural themes that preoccupied the filmmakers of the First New Wave largely disappeared from domestic cinema.⁵⁵⁷ With the rising

⁵⁵⁷Kong Ritthdee, "Filming Locally, Thinking Globally: The Search for Roots in Contemporary Thai Cinema," *Cinéaste* 36, no. 4 (2011): 16–19; May Adadol Ingwanij, "Transistor," 87.

popularity of television, films struggled to compete and remain economically viable. Instead, the industry discovered economic success with teen-oriented, low-budget comedy films, which dominated from 1985 until 1999.⁵⁵⁸ Those films were also widely criticized for introducing dubious morality to the Thai youth and shamelessly imitating Hollywood films.⁵⁵⁹ Whereas Western modernity was desirable, “slavish imitation” of the West was not.⁵⁶⁰ Prince Chatrichaloem’s dramatic depiction of youth drug use in his 1994 *Sia dai* (Daughter, 1994) was an early response to the rise of teen films.⁵⁶¹ However, the trend was relatively short-lived. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the film industry was once again in dire straits. Whereas one hundred Thai films were released in 1990, just twenty came out in 1997.⁵⁶²

In the wake of the 1997 crisis, the Second New Wave emerged.⁵⁶³ Films from directors like Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Wisit Sasanatieng, and Nonzee Nimitbutr transformed the domestic film industry from apocalyptic to celebratory. Nonzee achieved domestic success with *Dang Birely and the Young Gangsters* (1997), while Pen-ek’s *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997) and Wisit’s *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000) garnered acclaim on international film circuits.⁵⁶⁴ All three directors previously worked in advertising, and used that experience to produce aesthetically attractive, artistic films more likely to attract investment, critical recognition, and commercial success. In the context of the 1997 crisis, the intentions of the directors, the content of the films, and consumer markets were widely understood within frameworks of national identity crisis,

⁵⁵⁸ May Adadol Ingawanij, “Un-Thai Sakon: The Scandal of Teen Cinema,” *South East Asia Research* 14, no. 2 (2006): 147.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid, 161.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid, 168.; Craig Reynolds and Craig Reynolds, “Thai Identity in the Age of Globalization,” in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today* (Ching Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), 308.

⁵⁶¹ May Adadol Ingawanij, “Un-Thai Sakon,” 168.

⁵⁶² Ibid, 164. May pointed out that this was actually due to studios moving from numerous B-grade productions to fewer high quality films.

⁵⁶³ Confusingly, this period is also referred to as the “Thai New Wave,” so to distinguish it from the 1970s New Wave, I call it the Second New Wave.

⁵⁶⁴ Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Adam Knee, “Thailand: Revival in an Age of Globalization,” in *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Culture in a Global Frame*, ed. Anne Tereska Ciecko (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2006), 60.

globalization, and nostalgia. The post-1997 period came to be defined by a certain set of characteristics, namely increasingly attention to aesthetic features, appeal to both domestic commercial audiences and international critical communities, and depictions of a domestic landscape that have variously been deemed nostalgic and exoticized, oftentimes with didactic juxtapositions of rural and urban lives.

Thus, the rise of the Second New Wave shared important features with the first. It followed a period of filmmaking that was widely derided, albeit quite popular. Criticisms were concerned with issues of morality, as well as cultural representation and national identity. They both were influenced by periods of tumult and trauma. In the 1970s, it was the American intervention, authoritarianism, and political radicalism. In the 1990s, it was globalization and economic crisis. The films that followed all engaged in a search for authentic Thainess, while at the same time ensuring artistic legitimacy. International success remained an important marker legitimacy, as well as a point of honor for all Thais. Contemporary filmmaking, moreover, highlights the institutionalization of the Thai director as auteur. It is the directors, more than anyone else, who are the focus of acclaim, criticism, and scholarly analysis. Aphichatpong became the premier auteur of contemporary Thai independent film. Nonzee, Pen-ek, and Wisit have risen to become some of the most defining auteurs of post-1997 Thai film.⁵⁶⁵

As Annette Hamilton pointed out, cinema is as much the product of social, economic and political contexts as it is derived from the technical elements moderating “space, time, and perception.”⁵⁶⁶ Hamilton argued for the decisive role of the Thai government and elites in using post-1997 cinema as a tool to assert control of the political and social consciousness of Thai

⁵⁶⁵ Adam Knee, “Gendering the Thai Economic Crisis: The Films of Pen-Ek Ratanaruang,” *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 2 (September 1, 2003): 102.

⁵⁶⁶ Hamilton, “Cinema and Nation,” 141

audiences.⁵⁶⁷ Pattana Kitiarsa showed how films like *Ong Bak* asserted a standardized, “authentic” Buddhism in reaction to perceptions of increasingly secularized treatments in popular culture broadly.⁵⁶⁸ Likewise, Pattana’s analysis of nostalgic parody films acted as a sort of coping mechanism in reaction to the economic crisis and political turbulence caused by the 2006 coup against Thaksin Shinawatra.⁵⁶⁹

Furthermore, in both periods, films fixated on depictions of human relationships with or set amongst nostalgic rural landscapes. Indeed, rural themes returned to screens in the late 1990s and early 2000s with features such as *Wonderful Town* and *Isan Special*, as well as historical epic films like *Nang Nak* and *Hom Rong* (The Overture, 2004). The character of the landscape is intimately connected to the films’ characters, a relationship that is most clearly revealed in the distinctions made between urban and rural characters or when characters move between these two realms.

The former genre of films, which May called “Thai bourgeois heritage cinema,” display an exotic, verdant Thai landscape set nostalgically in the past. These representations of historical Thai life idealized class structures and abundance provided under elite rule, emphasizing the apparently enduring and stable relationship between peasants and the monarchy.⁵⁷⁰ The themes established in the Cold War period proved enduring. The temporal setting of these films further emphasizes the stable enduring quality of these tropes, connecting the past to the present day. Unlike the teen films, moreover, the films are presumed to be authentically Thai. As May observed, idealized representation of the rural in Thai cinema is ultimately about a “specifically

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, 158.

⁵⁶⁸ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Faiths and Films: Countering the Crisis of Thai Buddhism from Below,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 34, no. 2 (2006): 266-267.

⁵⁶⁹ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Nostalgic Parodies and Migrant Ironies in Two Thai Comedy Films,” in *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention*, ed. David C.L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁷⁰ May Adadol Ingawanij, “Transistor,” 81.

urban middle class investment in cultural goods that enact the trope of arresting the eyes of the world for their display of ‘exemplary’ Thainess.”⁵⁷¹

Ironically, however, the films drew on expressions once derided by the bourgeois and elite. Using Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s *Monrak transistor* (Transistor Love Song, 2001) as an example, May argued that through “capitalist appropriation and commodification of plebeian cultural forms, such as *luk thung* music and postwar lowbrow Thai cinema.... [films] are being transformed into signifiers of national authenticity.”⁵⁷² Likewise, Kong Rithdee noted the “search for roots” in the films of these directors, lamenting that “it’s an expedition of young men and women who’ve rummaged through the old boxes in the corner of the attic to find what’s still useful for their new ventures.”⁵⁷³ Whereas First Wave directors were pioneering a new way of using film as a platform for expression and depictions (as well as critiques) of Thainess, many of the Second New Wave directors, particularly those making heritage films, appear to simply be polishing-up old tropes.

While forms of cinematic realism came to characterize Thai filmmaking from the early-1970s to mid-1980s, the role of the spectator was not forgotten. Indeed, *Phlae kao* opened with a direct appeal to audiences to protect Thainess. It demonstrated that the narration of a film’s message and meaning was no longer a spontaneous act in the hands of comedic characters or live narrators, but more than ever before in those of the directors. These directors, alongside their production teams, consciously constructed the films’ editing, content, aesthetics, and packaging to make an impact on audiences’ psychologies and emotions. Furthermore, a discourse of intellectual and artistic legitimacy protected and made dominant those methods of production.

⁵⁷¹ May Adadol Ingawanij, “Nang Nak: Thai Bourgeois Heritage Cinema,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 191.

⁵⁷² May Adadol Ingawanij, “Transistor,” 94.

⁵⁷³ Kong Rithdee, “Search for Roots,” 17.

Combined with changes in film exhibition styles, these changes resulted in a standardization of new demands made on the perceptive habits of Thai film audiences.

CONCLUSION

Between the late 1950s and 1970s, Thai and US films created Cold War era constructions of Thai national identity based primarily on gendered cultural difference. National identity during the Cold War was paradoxically based on both the Thai state's strategic collaboration against communism with the United States government, and the cultural rejection of Western liberal social norms by the urban Thai bourgeois. From the 1950s onwards an array of people, from bureaucrats to US operatives to artists to activists, turned to film to make claims to national consciousness, political norms, and social values. Film was an important medium for social power, a modern technology capable of crossing spatial boundaries within and across nations. These characteristics became significant for the first time during the Cold War. Study of the Cold War film industry in Thailand, therefore, highlights significant ambiguities in Thailand's alliance with the United States and the developmental agenda. Official and elite engagement with film, whether actively as producers or reactively as regulators, asserted a deeply conservative image of the country on screen and a desire to build a national cinema through protectionist measures. At the intersection of these forces, women and their sexual behavior became important signifiers of cultural distinctiveness and belonging in the Thai nation. Women's gender and sexual norms became central to elite assertions of cultural citizenship in opposition to both political ideologies (i.e. communism) and cultural models (especially American). National identity was predicated on women's unique and unequal status.

Film both followed and facilitated the spatial and psychological extension of the Thai state and the capitalist economy. Exposure to cinema grew symbiotically with the penetration of development schemes into villages of the rural North and Northeast. Villages became important sites for building loyalty to the government and asserting Thailand's position as a modernizing,

capitalist society. Thailand's modern identity was made true through national development. At the same time, nationalist assertions of cultural identity considered the village an important location of national authenticity, in part because of the lack of capitalist, and Western, sophistication. However, villagers also proved threatening because in the view of Bangkokians, villagers were not sophisticated film consumers. With the expansion of communication infrastructure and capitalist markets, provincial taste started to matter and negatively impact Bangkok. In the film industry, government officials, intellectuals, and many filmmakers linked the profitability of the provincial film market with the low-quality state of Thailand's cinema.

This created a tension in which villages were simultaneously sites of authenticity but also embarrassing examples of Thailand's lack of sophistication and modernity. Film was a two-way process, albeit in a limited and unequal fashion. Film was used to broadcast propaganda to the provinces, and provincial sensibilities to Bangkok through the ability for provincial viewers to exert market influence. In response, the government and Bangkok-based filmmakers enforced invented constructions of rural authenticity that avoided embarrassing displays of provincialism, but also strategically wielded a lack of sophistication against the threat of Westernization. This was part of a highly paternalistic process that also served to maintain hierarchal social relationships. As the films of the late 1970s show, Thailand's Cold War experience ended with the standardization and ritualization on screens of a conservative, Bangkok-centered construction of a uniquely Thai cultural identity.

By way of conclusion, I will give a brief overview of my major arguments, and then turn to a more detailed discussion of my four major contentions. In part, my research addresses a surprising absence in the historiography of modern Thailand. While the Cold War period is often understood and referred to as transformative, very few studies exist that critically and seriously

engage with why and how that transformation occurred and what it meant for people living in Thailand.⁵⁷⁴ The period between the 1940s through to the 1990s is still largely uncharted territory in the historiography of Thai social history. This is a significant gap that obscures the critical popular experience of the interaction of authoritarianism, industrialization, development, modernization, and American intervention in Thai society, culture, and national identity formation. The American alliance, for example, is important because it served as a site for the popular contestation of national development and state power. Rather than focusing on elite politics, this directs the gaze at how people more generally experienced the intimate implications of development, psychological warfare, and anti-communism.

It some cases, the existing historiographical neglect of the authoritarian and Cold War period implies that some processes of national consolidation and identity formation, such as the position and role of women (meaning actual women and women as symbols), were complete by the mid-twentieth century. This in turn contributes to the invisibility of women in histories of the Cold War and radicalism in Thailand. I have shown, however, that these processes were very much ongoing and contested. Women were far from the passive creatures shown in films like *Plae Kao* or *Cold Fire*, or even the figures in the background like the sick wife in *Thongpan*. Women from diverse backgrounds were actively engaged in questioning the status quo, from labor conditions to family law to political structures.⁵⁷⁵ Queen Sirikit was likewise more

⁵⁷⁴ The best studies for looking at politics, society, popular culture, and national identity include Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Despotic Paternalism*; Fineman, *A Special Relationship*; Phillips, *Cold War*; Harrison, "The Man with the Golden Gauntlets"; Anderson, "Introduction to In the Mirror"; Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms"; Saichon Sattayanurak, *Khukrit and the Invention of "Thainess"* (*Khukrit kap pradittakam "khwampen Thai"*) (Bangkok: Matichon, 2007); Phinyaphan Photchanalawan, *The Origins of "Thailand" Under Authoritarianism* (*Kamnoet "prathet Thai" phaitai phadetkan*) (Bangkok: Samnakphim Matichon, 2015).

⁵⁷⁵ Both Tyrell Haberkorn and Sudarat Musikawong discussed women as student activists and women's movements. Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted*; Sudarat Musikawong, "Gendered Casualties." Benedict Anderson also referenced the gendered aspects of intellectual engagement between Bangkok and the provinces in his study of literature during the "American Era." However, he did not engage directly with gender analysis, including in his

significant to the revival of the monarchy as an institution imbedded in tradition, cultural heritage, and Thainess than is commonly acknowledged. Characters like Riam in *Rongraem Narok* or Daeng in *Tone*, as well as the women filmed at the Hara Factory strike, give a better impression of the diversity of women's activities and perspectives on feminine behavior.

Despite the political and social activism of real Thai women, filmic and Thai state propaganda constructed a feminine national ideal as passive, loyal, politically uninterested, and morally upright.⁵⁷⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, modern Thai national identity depended on gender conformity, not only in public or surface appearances, but also in daily behavior and social interactions. However, the pressures of imperialism and Westernization had, to some extent, inserted discourses concerned with women's status and the need to modernize, among other things, family law. In part, this was to bring Thailand's modern identity in line with Western standards imposed through imperial expansion. However, with the Cold War, significantly more emphasis was placed on women as bearers of tradition in opposition to both communist and American models. On the one hand, loyalty, obedience, cultural uniqueness and authenticity, and respect for social institutions were all part of Thailand's identity as anti-communist. Women were depicted as generally impervious to the appeals of communism. On the other, they were highly vulnerable to the appeals of consumerism and Western excess. As we see in a range of films, from *Theptida rongraem* to *Khao chue kan*, women were both less political

discussion of the only female author included in the volume, Si Dao Ruang. Anderson and Mendiones, *In the Mirror*, 47, 59-61.

⁵⁷⁶ The dynamics of gender and nationalism during the Cold War has received little scholarly consideration, with the exception of Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders*. Several scholars have shown the significance of gender and sexuality in historical processes of in Thai history, historiography, and national identity formation. These include Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam : Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* / (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2006); Barne, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*; Peleggi, "Refashioning Civilization"; Craig Reynolds, "Engendering Thai Historical Writing," in *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Singapore: University of Washington Press, 2006), 122-40; Hong Lysa, "Palace Women at the Margins of Social Change: An Aspect of the Politics of Social History in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999): 310-24; Hong Lysa, "Of Consorts and Harlots in Thai Popular History," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 2 (1998): 333-53.

than men, but also more easily seduced by the allure of the West. They represented the best of Thai cultural and social authenticity, but also the threat of how Thainess might be lost. This created a situation in which women experienced the processes of modernization and development in highly unequal ways.

The Cold War period was also a unique historical moment for film. Technological changes and international market exchanges allowed more people access to film production technologies than ever before. Previously, the extreme expense and lack of access to film equipment and processing facilities meant that only a select few engaged in filmmaking. However, with the rise of sixteen-millimeter film and eventually eased access to thirty-five millimeter film, something resembling a mass industry could develop. This created a tension between perceptions of film as an elite or government activity and the reality of mass tastes and sensibilities. At the same time, a site of film distribution and consumption was still fairly limited. The VHS revolution was still on the horizon, so most people viewed films in large audiences in cinemas or open air settings. This meant that film was still a social experience, and one that often took on a ritual-like significance. Cinema, from production to exhibition to spectatorship, was a political act at the boundary between the personal and the public. It had the capacity to shape not only political identities, but also intimate understandings of social belonging. Consequently, the stakes for how films were exhibited and who controlled their content were high.

Film also elicited intense emotional reactions. That was the understanding, at least, when the royal anthem was played before each film or when officials expressed embarrassment over the sorry state of domestic cinema. For this reason, and those discussed above, film became an important tool and a site in the contestation of social power. This was true for the production of films by the USIS, intellectuals, and conservative elites. It was also true when the state

intervened to fund quality filmmaking and established studios. It was again true when censors prohibited films from exhibition when they were seen to violate moral standards. Cold War cinema intersected with development discourses, gendered assertions of national identity, and official and elite attempts to intervene in the social life of the nation. Cinema thus became one of the critical spaces where what it meant to belong to the modern Thai nation was expressed and consumed.

My first main contention is that from the 1950s forward, the Thai state inserted itself into the social fabric of society on a national scale. Whereas previous attempts, notable under Phibun, were limited by practical logistics and the ability for the state to enforce its will, changes in communication technologies and national development schemes granted new capabilities to the state. To a large degree, those changes were the result of massive intervention in Thailand by the United States. That intervention, in line with the system of US geo-political power internationally and transnationally, was based on discourses of development, opening capitalist markets, and improving the standard of living. It was also based on the promotion of American cultural values, and therefore made the promotion of American cultural exports a priority. Meanwhile, the possibility of American intervention was predicated on the interest of the Thai government in inaugurating and maintaining the alliance. The rise of military politics and authoritarianism under Phibun, Sarit, and Thanom enabled this. While the military welcomed the alliance due to the material and status advantages it brought, the authoritarian structure of the regime arguably meant that socio-economic change that accompanied the deepening of the relationship occurred more quickly and extensively. In sum, social change was produced by the interplay of three major forces: namely, the nature of American intervention, authoritarian domestic politics, and technological innovation.

Using Chwe's conception of how ritual produces and influences common knowledge, I argued that film was a critical tool in producing social power and as a medium for official and elite conceptions of Thai national society and culture. As I discussed in chapter two, for example, films shown in rural villages by mobile information teams represented significant events in the dissemination of information. The films were a focal point of village life, potentially watched by everyone. No one would be unaware of the broad content of the films, even if their grasp of the specifics were hazy. The film showings held by the mobile teams therefore had the potential (and the aim) of influencing the collective political and social narratives shared by village communities.

However, films also represented potential threats to the common knowledge and normative practices valued by the urban elite. As I showed in my discussion of censorship in chapter three, bureaucratic censors strictly regulated the exhibition of films, which provided potentially disruptive models for female sexual agency and family structures. It was that attitude that led the censors to ban *The Touch*, a film about a Swedish housewife who has an affair with an American anthropologist. Adultery had a significant function in the film, specifically as a way to explore marital relationships, social expectations, and the role of women in the family. The themes were deeply embedded in the film. However, regulation was not simply a matter of policing hypothetical disruptions, but was intimately connected to debates over family law, women's rights, and female sexuality. Therefore, while censorship was a matter of public image, it was also a tool to police private sex.

The exercise of social power, however, was not simply a matter of state repression. It was also a productive process in which non-state actors, including American officials and Thai socio-economic elites, played a critical role. Indeed, as I highlighted in chapter four, non-government

actors, such as prominent filmmakers, actively argued for increased government intervention in social and cultural life. The case of *Santi-Vina* demonstrates those attitudes. Officials, intellectuals, and filmmakers initially celebrated the film's showing abroad for showcasing Thai culture. But upon his return to Thailand, director Rat Pettanyi was essentially fined for his failure to follow bureaucratic procedure. The role of the state in creating barriers to professional filmmaking and the subsequent need for reform was increasingly clear. The creation of policies to protect quality filmmaking, moreover, was motivated by anxieties over the impact of foreign cultural, social, and economic influences. The proliferation of conservative, rural messages in the First New Wave films of the 1970s highlights the role of non-state actors in shaping constructions of Thai national identity, as well as the perceived need to compete with Hollywood films in exercising social power. Choed Songsri, who was educated in the United States, returned to Thailand to make explicitly "Thai" films. *Plae kao* epitomized that search for authenticity, but also the need for filmmaking according to international standards. Overall, these efforts were highly successful in imbedding a deeply conservative, static conception of national identity in modern Thai politics and society.

The concerns over reforming and regulating film evidence that film wasn't simply a popular form of entertainment, it also became both an indexical point at which the state of the nation could be revealed and a conscious tool in the promotion of national identity. On the first point, I have shown how the state of the film industry was commonly linked to the state of the nation. This perspective first emerged in reaction to the popularity of sixteen-millimeter productions and the profitability of provincial markets. The phrase *nam nao*, originally used to imply political stagnation, was transferred to film, creating the derogatory category *nang nam nao*. The phrase highlights the anxieties felt by those in Bangkok, including military officers,

government officials, intellectuals, and filmmakers, at the low quality of the rural taste, and by implication the threat of broadening national enfranchisement initiated by development schemes. I used the Dok Din film *Julatrikhun* to discuss the characteristics of the sixteen-millimeter, which utilized characteristics from local performative practices and failed to follow the tenets of Hollywood-style production, such as continuity editing. Even though Dok Din was enormously successful, produced numerous popular films, and had his own film studio, he was not accepted by the elite as a “professional” filmmaker.

Coinciding with the attempts by Thai filmmakers such as Rat Pettanyi to participate in international film festivals, *nang nam nao* weren’t simply a domestic nuisance, but an international embarrassment disrupting Thailand’s attempts to portray itself as a modernizing nation. Even today, achievements by filmmakers like Prince Sapphasat and Rat Pettanyi are referred to as honoring or granting dignity (*kiattiphum*) to the nation. Thus, film heroes emerged to pull the industry out of stagnant water, and promote the value of Thai national culture at home and abroad through a national cinema. These attitudes were at work at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair, when the Rat Pettanyi produced *The Diamond Finger* showcased Thai dancing and music in a story narrated by Kukrit Pramoj and film with the latest film technologies. The film was screened in a theater and attended by political and social elite, including King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit. The high technological and aesthetic quality of films by these directors, from Rat to Choed Songsri to Prince Chatrichaloem Yukhon, represented the hope of legitimate film practice.

While opposition to the low-quality *nang nam nao* grew, so too did anxieties regarding foreign productions, particularly those from Hollywood. From the perspective of fearful (and perhaps curious) censors, Hollywood films were often too compelling, presenting seductive

depictions of women engaging in illicit behavior. In the context of challenges to family law, women's rights activities, and foreign models for female behavior brought by American consumer goods, depictions of sex and sexuality in cinema became a focal point of regulation. Sex on screen threatened the morality of the nation. Even as adultery amongst bureaucrats was gossiped about and debated in newspapers, depictions of adultery in films, particularly of female adultery, were erased by the censors. This was linked to the connection between female behavior and national belonging. Once films produced in the United States crossed the national borders into Thailand, they ceased to be appropriate based on different understandings of sexual decency. Those differences were understood as being critical to the national culture. Like *The Touch*, Piak Posters *Chu* featured adultery as a prominent part of the storyline. However, because Piak drew on domestic conceptions of sexual authority, morality, and karma, film censors considered it appropriate. In censoring offending images, the officials that populated the censorship boards revealed a high level of consciousness about what film may be capable of revealing and what its impact on audiences would be.

Opposition to foreign films was supported, moreover, by filmmakers like Prince Phanuphan Yukhon, Rat Pettanyi, and Prince Anuson Mongkhonkan. Hollywood films drew most of the criticism. In part, this was because Hollywood films had a near monopoly on the market. Chinese and Indian films, moreover, were seen to appeal primarily to the Chinese and Indian populations, as opposed to Thais. The criticism of Hollywood films also resulted from growing antagonism towards the American presence in Thailand. The dominance of Hollywood films in Bangkok theaters served as clear evidence of US economic exploitation and the problems of intervention. That stance, for different reasons, found supporters from across the political spectrum, including individuals as different as Jit Phumisak and Thanin Kraivichian. Thus,

what films were shown at cinemas, and the competitiveness of domestic films, became signs of the nation's ability to maintain its national culture and economic independence.

Thus, I have argued that, in the twenty or so years that encompassed Thailand's engagement with the United States and the fight against communism, national belonging was increasingly predicated on moral values based on a uniquely Thai cultural system. Thai cultural identity was anti-communist. The US and Thai governments were both eager to assert that message to the population. As I noted in chapter two, movies such as *Fai Yen* portrayed communists as liars, murderers, and disrespectful, while loyal Thais were hardworking, honest, and deferential. In *Fai Yen*, the communist-bandits targeted the schoolteacher and the abbot. Together, those figures represent both tradition and progress. Whereas the abbot is important in maintaining Buddhist values, and implicitly the male hierarchy of authority, the schoolteacher represents modern educational values and the promise of improvement.

Constructions of the threat of communism, moreover, were highly gendered. Men were most vulnerable to the persuasions of communism, as seen most particularly with Phon. Both by implication and explicitly depicted in the film, moreover, women upheld values of Thainess. As the scene between Phin and Phon's mother reveals, those values were associated with loyalty to the symbols of the state, but also an acceptance of one's position and the inevitability of suffering. Those values are embedded as well in a Buddhist worldview in Thailand, in which women and men are thought to experience worldly attachment (and therefore suffering) in gendered ways.⁵⁷⁷ Thus, notions of loyalty, gratitude, and social hierarchies were deeply imbedded into Cold War constructions of Thai national identity. Moreover, those values were increasingly linked to the Thai village, which, as I discussed both in chapters two and five, was

⁵⁷⁷ For a more extensive analysis of gender and Buddhism in Thailand see Charles F. Keyes, "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand," *American Ethnologist* 11, no. 2 (1984): 223–41.

viewed as both historically situation and authentic. Thus, Thainess was read back into the Thai past as a timeless value.

However, while Thainess as anti-communist was critical to the development of social and cultural national identities, I argue that national identity was also framed in opposition to Thailand's most important ally, the United States. This sentiment became more apparent as the 1970s wore on. Whereas in Piak's 1970 *Tone*, characters enjoyed Western fashion and music uncritically, by 1977 *Phlae kao* explicitly called for the need to protect "Thainess" at the beginning of a film that contrasted rural authenticity with urbanized Westernization. Many of the prominent filmmakers of the 1970s had in fact received their education in the United States, gone back to Bangkok film studios and, increasingly, the Thai countryside to make their films, and then to international film festivals for exhibition. Moving between these spaces, they situated themselves, and their films, in Thailand's international and domestic politics. Hollywood studios, and the greedy theatre owners who rejected domestic films in favor of the more profitable Hollywood productions, were seen as part of a predatory system indicative of the problems of American intervention. Aside from being exploitative, the films also introduced foreign cultural values that threatened the fabric of Thai national society. A national cinema was conceptualized to take back the Thai industry and to promote Thai national culture. The creation of the Thai Motion Picture Producers Association and production of films like *Plae kao* highlight the ambivalences that characterized Thailand's Cold War experience.

With depictions of Thai cultural difference and the rise of conservative nationalism, women as figures of tradition and continuity became critical to defining the borders of national identity. This was clear early on when Queen Sirikit attracted the attention of the international and Thai press with her savvy use of so-called traditional Thai female costume to promote the

image of the nation abroad. It also played a significant role in censorship, when depictions of foreign female sexual expression posed a threat to “Thai” morality. First New Wave films, meanwhile, explored female sexual choices, whether by Riam in *Plae kao* or Malee in *Theptida rongraem*, as a way to express political and social commentary. In *Theptida rongraem*, the women’s sexual choices were explicitly linked to national issues. This was most clear when the young girl refused to become a prostitute and was beaten on top of a roof. The scenes of violence against her, and her ultimate decision to jump from the building, were juxtaposed with scenes from the 1973 popular uprising. Malee’s descent into prostitution, on the other hand, went hand in hand with the excesses of American consumerism, including short skirts and a new transistor radio. Her final decision to leave the trade is likewise revealed in her change to simple, although still Western, jeans and a shirt. In this way, women and femininity was critical to how Thai political and social actors constructed Cold War identities in the face of early globalization and capitalist expansion.

Aside from creating idealized (and likely unattainable) constructions of women and femininity, gendered forms of national belonging and Thailand’s Cold War, anti-communist identity also denied women’s agency as political and economic actors. Political activism was defined as masculine by both conservative and progressive elements. In *Khao chue kan*, for example, Kan’s devotion to his rural patients and disgust for official corruption contrasted unfavorably with Haruthai’s domestic boredom, nostalgia for Bangkok, and need to go shopping. *Cold Fire* demonstrated the layered implications of women as bearers of cultural authenticity. As shown with young Phin and also with Phon’s elderly mother, the women in the village never had the possibility of becoming communists, unlike men. This was not because of any role or responsibility, as was the case with the schoolteacher or the abbot, who felt a duty to serve the

people of the village and loyalty to the state and sangha. Instead, the women naturally expressed core aspects of Thai cultural identity, including deference to authority and passivity, which characterized Cold War Thainess. Similarly, when censors repeatedly banned films depicting adultery, they helped to obscure debates about marriage and the role of women in the family.

This analysis supports my contention that studies of Thai history, and of the Cold War period in particular, need to utilize methodological approaches that take women seriously in international relations and domestic politics. Making women visible is part of the process of highlighting the gendered dynamics of how social, economic, and political power during the Cold War. By tying women to cultural and social tradition, not only was their political agency denied, but so too were their opportunities to engage with the changes brought by internationalization and consumer culture. In other words, women were neither consumers nor radicals, but instead “Thai.” However, as the documentary on the Hara factory strike reveal, women were active in the radical movement. Far from passive observers, they intelligently questioned and sought to change their social, economic, and political surroundings. The women discussed tactics and ideology. Ironically, they did so through a combination of a typically female occupation: sewing.

Cinema in Thailand from the 1950s to the 1970s, much as elsewhere in the world, was a shared public activity. It was not, however, experienced or shared equally. How people made and watched films depended on their social background – their gender, class, and geographic identifications. This was not just the result of how Thai audiences positioned themselves, but also the ways that the creators of the films—whether the government bodies or commercial filmmakers—understood the relationship between spectators and screen and, by implication, citizens and society. As the Cold War period wore on, shaped as it was by development

discourse, calls for modernization, and assertions of national cultural authenticity, cinema became a critical site in the contestation over how spectators engaged with the modern Thai nation and their belonging in the national community.

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